YEAR 2505
ZENITH, ENLIGHTENMENT, DECADENCE

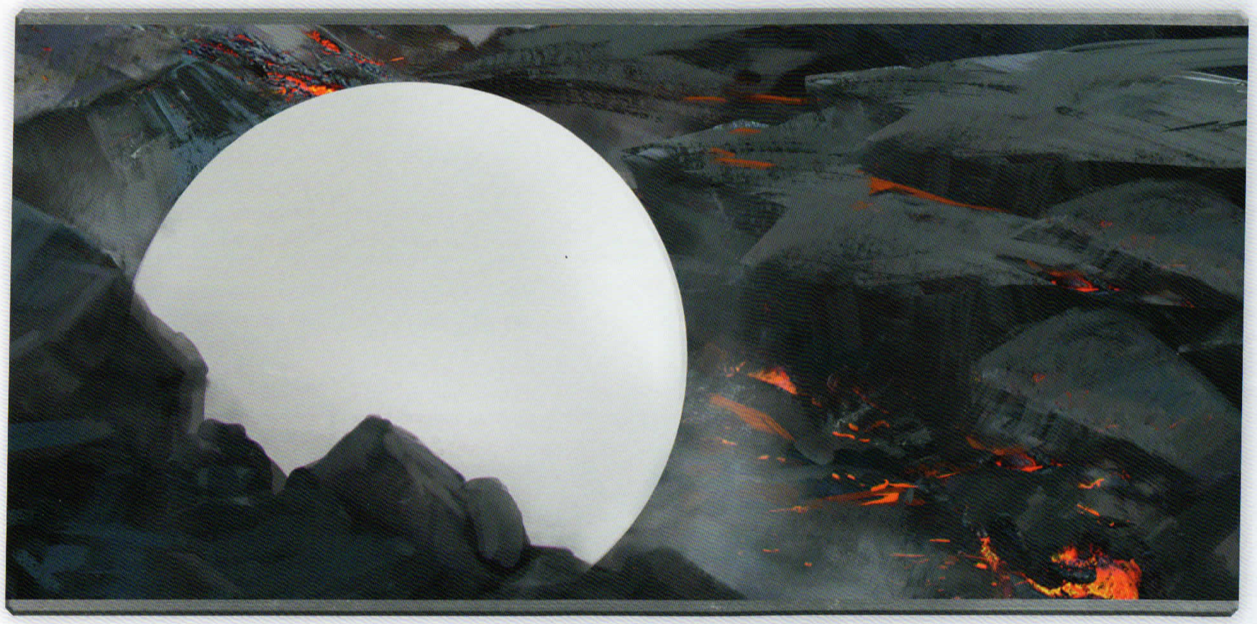
Mankind is at the height of its powers. Recent discovery, settlement and exploitation of the bountiful Cradle Worlds with the aid of the Shaltari has allowed humanity to expand throughout the galaxy. Although Shaltari benevolence proved short lived and false, the benefits these planets brought to mankind were profound and far reaching. From its glistening and beautiful capital cities to its earnestly toiling backwater colonies, humanity became the model of an industrious and enlightened culture.

The spectre of mankind's past wars for resources had long been banished by its twin discoveries of fusion power, (providing limitless clean energy), and Foldspace (faster than light) space travel, opening up the wider galaxy for settlement. With expanding domains and few restrictions, humanity was in the midst of its most peaceful age in history and able to focus its energies into innovation, art and science on an unprecedented level. Aestheticism, hedonism and decadence were rife, but deemed just reward for finally ending mankind's past appetites for self-destruction. Even the once ravaged homeworld of Earth was being transformed back into the rightful core of mankind's domains that it was always meant to be.

However, such untroubled splendour seldom lasts and would soon to be snuffed out like a candle in the darkness...

YEAR 2506
SPHERE, WARNING, FOREBODING

A year before the doom of this age would arrive, a mysterious and undoubtedly alien object fell from space to a region of Earth once known as Peru.



This enigmatic device later became known as the White Sphere, an AI of immense power and unknowably advanced artifice well beyond that of even the Shaltari. As soon as it was connected with probes from a networked research terminal, the Sphere was able to hack and lockout every computer in the South American subcontinent and use the colossal bandwidth to upload fathomless amounts of data. Recent intelligence suggests that it was also able to communicate with parties unknown outside the facility, and shortly after its network attack the research station was raided and the Sphere removed.

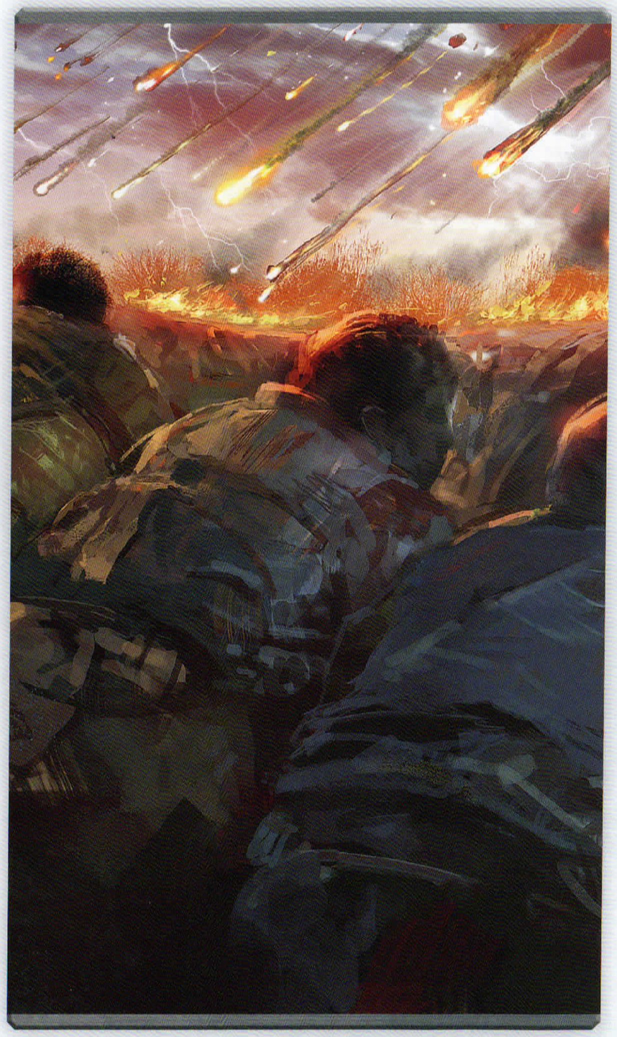
Days later, a message was broadcast across all channels on every inhabited human world. This was a dire warning, imploring mankind to abandon Earth and the Cradle Worlds and follow mysterious guidance to uncharted and unknown space in exactly one year's time or face death at the hands of an implacable foe. Great confusion, fear and mistrust were sown by this missive, causing deep divisions within human society.

Heeding the warning, a tide of convinced souls abandoned Earth and the Cradle Worlds to their prophesied fate. Comandeering, stealing, and chartering ships of all classes and sizes, the Abandonist fleet headed to Vega IV, the coordinates supplied by the White Sphere in its Warning. In response, the ruling government sent a fleet to intercept them in an attempt to hold humanity together in this time of crisis.

In order to make good their escape, the Abandonists chose to fire upon the fleet sent to stop them, initiating the infamous Battle of Vega, then the most deadly void engagement in the history of humanity. This provided a chance for the majority of their armada to jump into the unknown darkness of space. Their faith in The Warning spared them the horrors of the coming invasion, and would sew the seeds of a new society. This action crippled humanity's small fleet on the eve of their reckoning, an act of fratricide and betrayal that those that remained would struggle to ever forgive.

YEAR 2507
INVASION, CATASTROPHE, FALL

Mankind's golden age came to a final and catastrophic end on 3rd May 2507, just two days after the battle of Vega. The battered fleet and small peacetime army were utterly unprepared for the nightmare to come, despite full mobilisation.



At 06:00hrs EES (Earth Eastern Standard) time, thousands upon thousands of outlandish, chillingly alien ships leapt out of Foldspace and began moving at full speed towards Earth. Foldspace drives cannot function in close proximity to gravity wells, and as such it would take this unknown enemy eight hours to reach low orbit. Such a grim countdown only served to insidiously claw at the morale of the men on the ground, gripping their weapons and readying their vehicles for the coming battle.

Earth's Guardian Fleet might have been able to make an impact on the invasion armada, were it not for its battering at the hands of the Abandonists two days earlier. As it was, the vast alien armada simply swept Earth's last line of defence aside, sustaining minimal losses in return. The destruction of the human fleet was near total, with only a small collection of frigates, destroyers and lighters able to escape the slaughter. The men on the ground would be on their own.

Shortly after the armada achieved low orbit, the skies over Earth's cities blackened with bizarre dropships, the like of which had never been seen before. Interceptors and anti-air defences managed to take a grim toll on the enemy, such were the volume of targets. However, in reality it was like throwing stones at the tide.

Soon the fighting spread to the streets as thousands upon thousands of nightmarish alien vehicles and infantry made planetfall. In short order and with brutal efficiency, they proceeded to eradicate Earth's terrified defenders, slaughtering them with advanced and horribly deadly plasma weaponry.

Within hours, the fighting was mostly over and Earth was lost. The focus of the defenceless civilian population quickly shifted to escape at any cost.

Any ships which could be found were filled to bursting with panicked refugees desperate to flee their tormentors. With most communication channels filled with the screams of the defenceless and the dying, pleas for help and blank static, chaos and desperation hung over the populace like a curse. Mankind's long suppressed and banished animal instincts took over. Many were killed, expelled or crushed in the stampedes, skirmishes and struggles for a ride off planet.

Frequently, these frantic efforts were futile, with ships being disabled on the ground or before they put enough distance from Earth to reach a jump point. Ominously, the enemy seemed far more concerned with taking unarmed civilians alive than killing them by this stage, foreshadowing future revelations about this new and horrifying foe.

Those ships that did manage to jump away generally chose the remotest of mankind's colonies to escape to in the hope that they would be beyond the notice of the enemy. Those that jumped to any of the Cradle Worlds would find themselves back in a mirrored nightmare, as exactly the same events were unfolding on all seven of these great systems. A fortunate few were able to jump again, while many more were taken by the enemy before their drives could be recharged.

In less than 48 hours after the invasions, the governors of the as yet unassailed colonies gave the orders to reconfigure their planet's foldspace nodes. These beacons are required at destinations for accurate foldspace jumps, and with their recoding it would be impossible for any uninformed ships to use them, leaving those yet to escape to their doom. Most likely, this desperate and pragmatic act was what saved the colonies and those that fled to them, as surely the enemy would have discovered the node codes and followed the refugees to end free humanity once and for all.

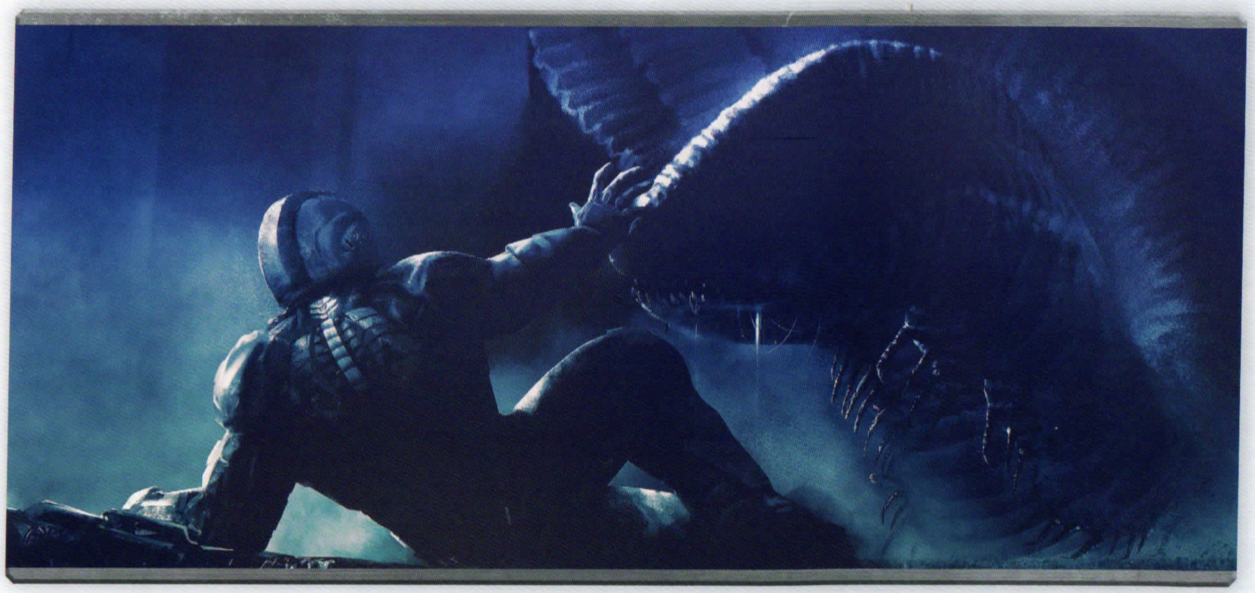
In total, it is estimated that only 1% of Earth's and 5% the Cradle World system's populations were able to escape to the colonies. Combined with the colonies' own modest populations, free humanity was but a small fraction of what it once was but would one day be enough to rise from the ashes and face that which ended mankind's greatest age.

YEARS 2508-2510
SCOURGE, GRIEF, WOUNDS

In the days and months that followed, the survivors had to come to terms with what they had lost and what sort of future they faced. The frontier colonies were a far cry from the grand majesty of Earth or the Cradle Worlds and many had a hard time adjusting. For the local's part, their isolated and backwater existence had suddenly become the focus for humanity's very survival and a haven for millions of refugees. These early days were marked with tension not only among the survivors and the natives, but in the very minds of all who lived, many of whom anxiously awaited the arrival of enemy invasion fleets in the skies above. Armed forces were virtually non-existent and almost no meaningful fleet of ships remained. The colonies were utterly defenceless.

Fortunately, the much dreaded invasions never came, and it seemed that measures taken to seal the colonies off from Earth and the Cradle Worlds had worked. Since the enemy ships were unable to simply jump to the colonies' locations (something it was reasoned they must have knowledge of by that time), it was reckoned that the Scourge required Foldspace nodes just as human ships did (unlike the hyper-advanced Shaltari, who seemed able to jump anywhere at will). This gave the survivors a measure of safety, although it also begged the question of how the invaders had attacked with eerie exactitude.

Many would treat this as a small comfort only, as the colonies were rough, hard planets on which to eke out an existence, far from Earth normal in climate, gravity and day-night cycles. However, they were rich in natural resources and their hardened populations were able to adapt to the new reality with speed and gusto in the face of a much greater threat than their fellow humans.



One of the first tasks for the emerging leadership was to determine in detail the true nature of their new and terrible enemy. Reporting of the invasion had been chaotic, generating mountains of mixed and confused intelligence that now had to be rationalised urgently.

It appeared the aliens were carbon based life forms not too dissimilar to Earth vertebrates in taxonomy. Whilst bearing a superficially lizard-like appearance, they were found to be warm blooded, oxygen breathers. The only puzzle that emerged was that aspects of their nervous system appeared radically different biologically. While clearly part of the body, it shared little similarity with the rest on a cellular, chemical and subjective level. In time, rarer records of other vastly different and more monstrous species emerged, ranging from hulking bipedal juggernauts to sinuous worm-like beings with hundreds of razor-sharp limbs. What was most striking was the sheer variety of seemingly unrelated bioforms. Physical specimens were extremely rare, but those that were available shared the same curious discord between aspects of their nervous system and the rest of their biology.

The designs of their constructs were more consistent in appearance, being hideously organic looking and sharing common design traits indicating a united engineering style and method. The conclusion was quickly reached that the vehicles and ships of the enemy were constructed entities and not biological in the living sense, although footage of destroyed constructs sometimes showed a black, tar like substance oozing from damaged sections. Unsurprisingly, only fragments were physically brought back as intelligence gathering and scientific understanding were very low on the list of priorities for those fleeing from them.

In time, a name for the enemy emerged which would reflect humanity's outlook and view of the terrible foe – The Scourge.

YEARS 2510-2669 REBIRTH, INTELLIGENCE, UNITED COLONIES OF MANKIND

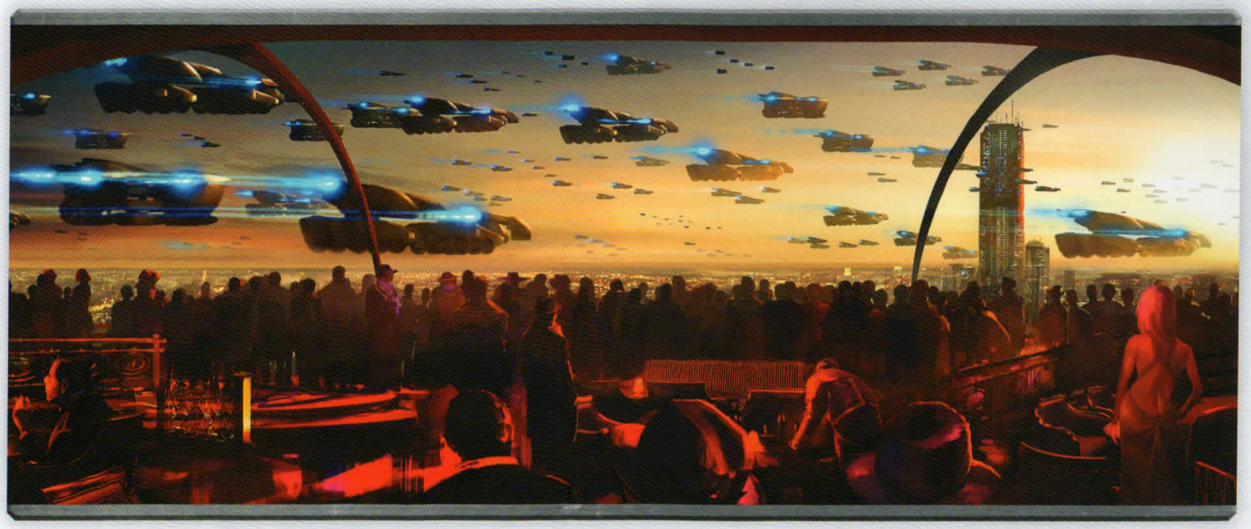
This 160 year period saw the Colonies transform from fringe societies into developed, prosperous civilisations. The influx of refugees from the central planets, coupled with a rise in birth rate caused a population explosion. For the first time, the vast mineral wealth of the Colonies (which had made them attractive as settlements in the first place) was exploited to the full. Towns and cities grew at amazing speed. Unlike the opulent, refined centres of the central planets, these were thriving, disorganised and rapidly constructed melting pots, making up in purpose what they lacked in style. The galaxy was an entirely different place for humanity ever since the invasion, but they had risen to the challenge with gusto.

This amazing story of rebirth can be partly attributed to the establishment of a multi planet federation formed in the early stages of the aftermath – The United Colonies of Mankind (UCM). The Colonies had charged headlong into an unprecedented level of cooperation and fraternity, driven by the overwhelming need to combat the Scourge, or face certain annihilation.

Few were under any illusions that the Scourge would not eventually find and node an accurate route to the Colonies. This new super-state became strongly militaristic in nature. Armament and military training reached a level not seen since the war torn 22nd Century, although for the first time ever, it was directed against an alien species.

New weapons were developed, and a state of the art fleet was laid down. This mighty assemblage was newly designed and was by far the largest in human history, and could boast a strength of many thousands of efficient, utilitarian warships, bristling with the most lethal weapons mankind could devise. After over one and a half centuries of such progression and meteoric growth, the United Colonies finally felt able to challenge the Scourge, and regain their lost homelands.

Intelligence gathering operations against the enemy were launched in the latter part of this period and for the first time, humans would return to the Solar System and the Cradle Worlds to witness what had become of their former heartlands. The first surprise was that this was possible at all – a fact enabled by the continued presence of human foldspace nodes on all but one of these systems. This gave the military hope that some form of resistance yet remained on the surface to maintain the portable ground nodes and keep them from enemy hands. Void-based stealth nodes had not yet been invented before the invasion and all space-borne types were reasoned to have been long since destroyed by the enemy.



Early and clandestine sorties revealed that a wide variety of human resistance groups did indeed exist. Tales from these groups were frequently harrowing accounts of years of torment, hunger, desperation and hardship beneath the notice of their oppressors. However, their many years under Scourge occupation provided invaluable intelligence for the UCM and shed further light on the true nature of the enemy.

The most shocking realisation was that many of the Scourge's current foot soldiers were outwardly human. After this revelation, it didn't take long to deduce that the aliens themselves were gelatinous neuroparasites that could take control of a carbon based host, bending the victim's actions to their will. It also became known that once taken, the host's aging process ceased, their span now tied to the natural life of the parasite itself. It was believed to be roughly 150-300 years as almost all the original lizard-like hosts and their parasites were now dead. As a result, much of the enemy's infantry were now the very same unfortunate souls assimilated during the invasion and Scourge numbers had not increased much beyond that.

It was also immediately obvious that as the Scourge absorb and use the bodies of their victims, so do they use some of the technologies and constructions of the captured race. Expecting to find no trace of their former civilisations, early observers were amazed to discover that most useful (industrial or military) areas of the Cradle Worlds and Earth were still in operation, turned or augmented by the enemy to suit their purposes, but still largely intact. Most crucially, the vast orbital instillations of these planets (some of which had taken over a century of toil to build were mostly intact).

Such a revelation gave further hope and purpose to the endeavour, greatly increasing the rewards of a successful reconquest.

By this time, the enemy was focused on the construction and dispatch of so called 'seed ships', small vessels sent into the cosmos to make blind foldspace jumps with the intent of seeking new victims to dominate. It was also confirmed that most enemy vehicles and other constructs were piloted by host-less 'pure' Scourge parasites, apparently bonded to their manufactured chassis permanently amid the black tar-like suspension already observed.

After these years of intelligence gathering and military buildup, the UCM High Council determined a course of action which would shape the mighty campaigns to come. With the revelation that human resistance remained on the Cradle Worlds, it was concluded that a simple mission of extermination was out of the question. Annihilation by thermonuclear bombardment from orbit would not only deny the UCM use of the Cradle Worlds in future, but would also cause unacceptable casualties among the resistance forces. Such an action would be extremely difficult in any case, such was the strength of Scourge missile defences. Battle would have to be joined the 'old fashioned way', by boots and armour on the ground coupled with substantial fleet support. This would not simply be a war of retribution, but of liberation.

JUNE 5TH, YEAR 2670 INTERVENTION, UNFORESEEN, LAUNCH

It was the eve of the launch of the Reconquest, a titanic operation the likes of which mankind had never before attempted. The sum total of over one and a half centuries of focused hatred, drive and the will of an entire species was about to be unleashed. Thousands upon thousands of mighty warships, countless battalions of tanks and the vast Colonial Legions were readied for battle, years of training and preparation were finally going to be put to the ultimate test. The Cradle World of Eden Prime - colloquially known as Jericho - was identified as the first target in this rolling campaign to topple the Scourge from their bloody thrones. June 6th was selected for this colossal attack, a deliberate choice echoing one from mankind's ancient past.

During the great departure ceremony on Aurum, the UCM's capital, a beautifully sleek and entirely unexpected vessel leapt out of foldspace on the planet's outer marker, holding station while hailing the High Council itself, all the necessary codes apparently in its possession. This ship was unlike anything witnessed before by the UCM, a clean, flowing hull shape contrasting sharply with brutally ranged weapon broadsides. Clearly not Shaltari or Scourge, in some ways it resembled human ships but was clearly far more refined than anything the UCMF had to offer. Its hail was answered, and the ship was escorted to Aurum's orbit by the Colonial heavy cruiser Rubicon. At last, a delegation descended to the surface to meet with the High Council, in session on this most momentous of days.

The unsettlingly altered yet clearly human group of delegates declared themselves representatives of the Post Human Republic, and descendants of those who had followed the White Sphere all those years ago. It was evident that they had progressed in a very different direction to the UCM and it was obvious to all but the blindest of observers that these beings were far more advanced somehow, perhaps with further guidance from the alien AI.

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The revelation of this new player on the stage of history at such an auspicious hour was deeply unwelcome, and foreshadowed the fact that the campaign to come would be far from a simple one-on-one duel to the death. This mysterious new culture would undoubtedly have a part to play in the future, and perhaps a crucial one for all of mankind.

YEARS 2670-2672 WAR, CONFLAGRATION, RECONQUEST

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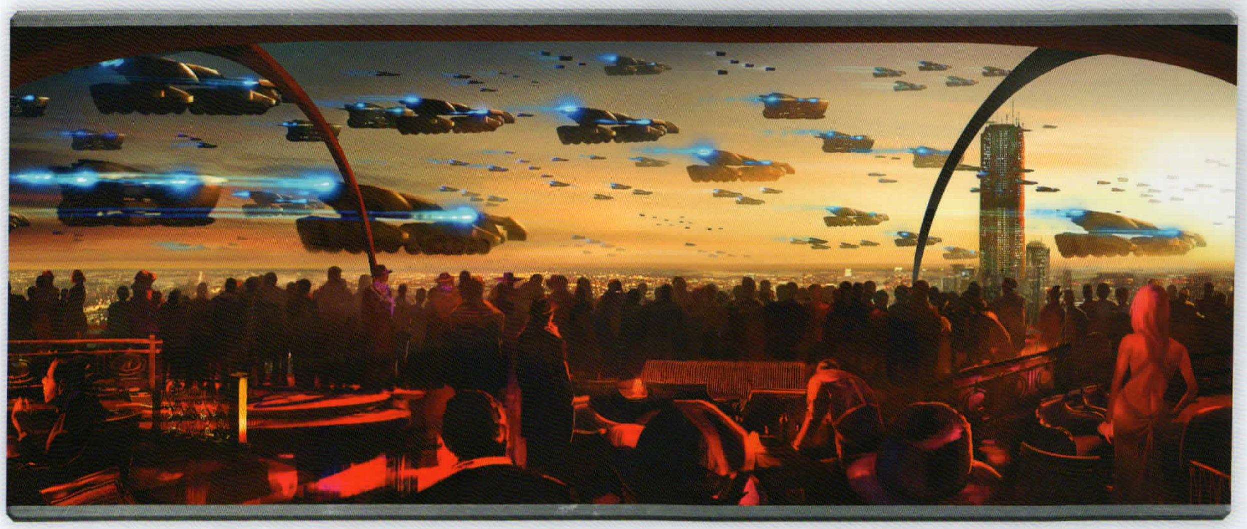

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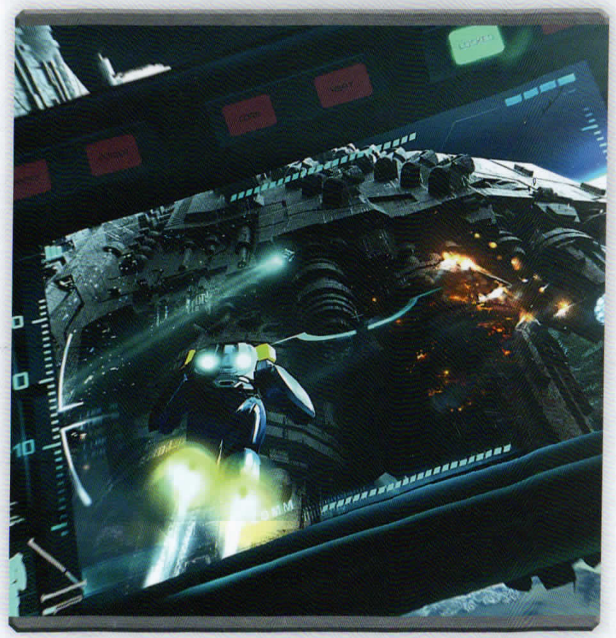
Eden System

January 27th, 2672, D+600 (Theatre), D+600 (Reconquest)



The Cradle World of Eden Prime was the first beachhead chosen for the Reconquest campaign since it was the second most populous human planet behind Earth itself before the Scourge invasion. It was decided that such a tier-1 target was perfect for the opening blow of the campaign as the element of surprise would only apply in the campaign's first moments.

On June 6th, 2670, the largest armada ever assembled by mankind descended with righteous fury on their unsuspecting foe. Battlefleet Eden on this fateful day remains the largest single naval force in human history, even after almost two years at war. Although fleet losses were significant, they were a drop in the ocean for this force and overwhelming victory in the void was never really in doubt.

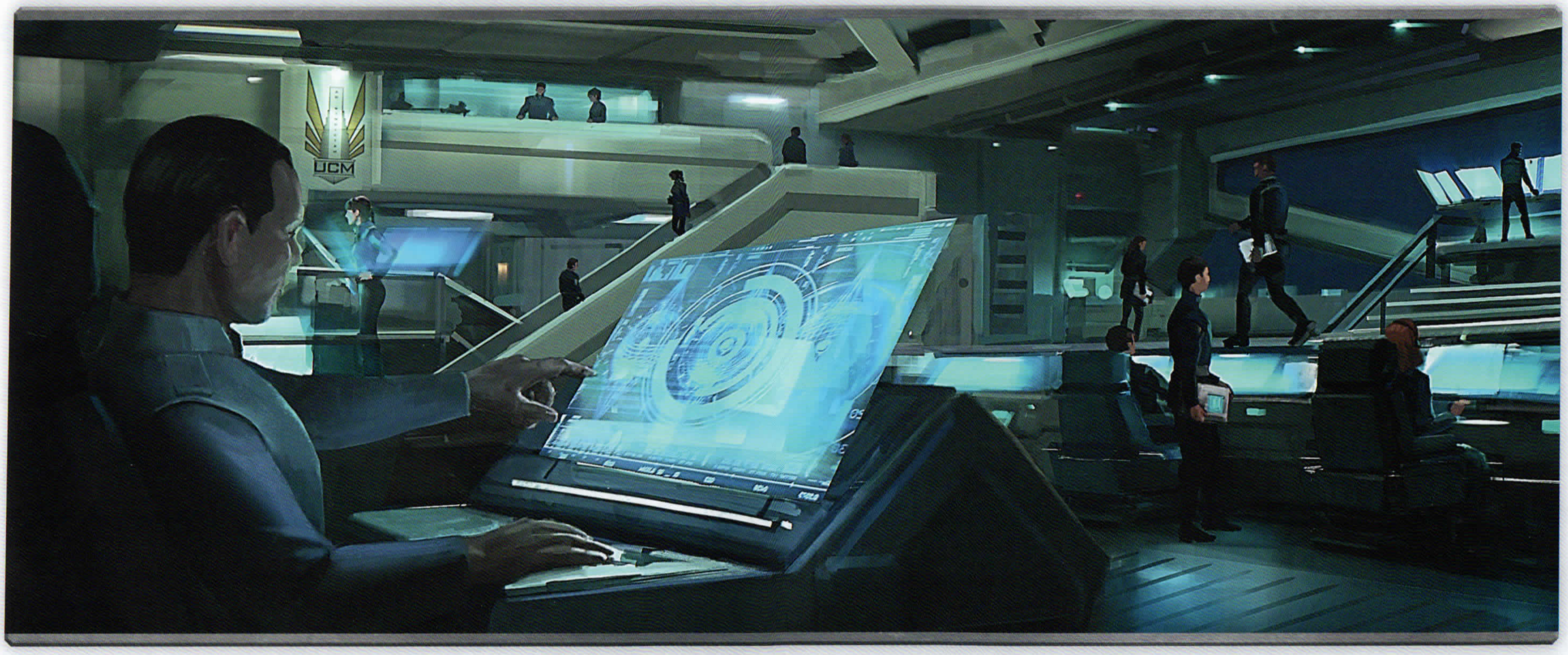
As the enemy's pickets were swept aside, over four hundred strike carriers made their fiery decent into the planet's atmosphere and began to deploy the first wave of armour and mechanised infantry, largely around the outskirts of the capital, New Troy. Closely following them were the bulk landers, dropping vast hordes of infantry and defence batteries around the recently secured dropsites. Around this city alone, 400,000 ground troops were wounded and 350,000 killed on this first day. In orbit, over 90,000 sailors of the UCMF had lost their lives. Despite this being mankind's bloodiest day in 163 years, D-Day's operations were declared a unanimous success.

A staggering 350 million human beings took part in some way on that very first day, over a third of mankind's mobilised population, although of course only a small fraction of these were fighting soldiers. The employment of an overwhelming hammer blow was essential to secure a quick and early victory on Eden Prime as well as the time honoured principle of power directed to a point.

As the campaign on Eden Prime moved into Phase 2 and all enemy ships in the system were confirmed destroyed, the cities of New Troy and Romagrad were at last declared free of enemy presence – a welcome triumph if slightly behind schedule. The planet's industrial centres around its famous mantle scar known as Odin's Foundry followed shortly afterwards. With most of the planet in Colonial hands, 70% of UCM strength in the system was siphoned off to other emerging fronts, the remainder deemed sufficient to mop up all residual Scourge on the ground.

Scourge forces were in the midst of a belligerent but ultimately doomed stand in the city of Atlantia and were able to hold the city centre until June 30th 2671, when the UCMA's push to finally take the city took a disastrous turn. The local and brutal human resistance warlord known as Salakahn was opposed to Colonial rule and made the monstrous decision to betray his own race by detonating a score of concealed strategic nuclear weapons beneath the city streets. The resulting cataclysmic inferno snuffed out the remainder of the Maganum II'nd Legion and two full strength Armoured Corps, almost one million Colonial soldiers in the blink of an eye. The vile despot committed this heinous crime to cover his retreat from the city and slow the UCM's progress, in the hope of sustaining his increasingly tenuous grip on power a little longer. Small comfort that all Scourge in the city were also annihilated, in addition to a PHR taskforce that apparently had a mysterious (and presumably now failed) mission to achieve in the city.

The Tyrant of Atlantia is even now skulking under the noses of the Scourge in the frozen northern city of New Athens, the final enemy stronghold on the planet and last objective of Phase 3. That there is any fighting left at all on the surface is a tragedy that can be laid firmly at Salakahn's feet,



although the Shaltari have been slowing efforts in the final ground assault on the city. The only other source of opposition on the planet, the heavy Scourge armour concentration in the city of Star Casablanca was ultimately annihilated by low-ionisation tactical nuclear strike on November 13th, 2671 with the aid of local resistance groups. This marked the UCM's first use of such weapons on a Cradle World, highlighting the extremity of the tactical situation there.

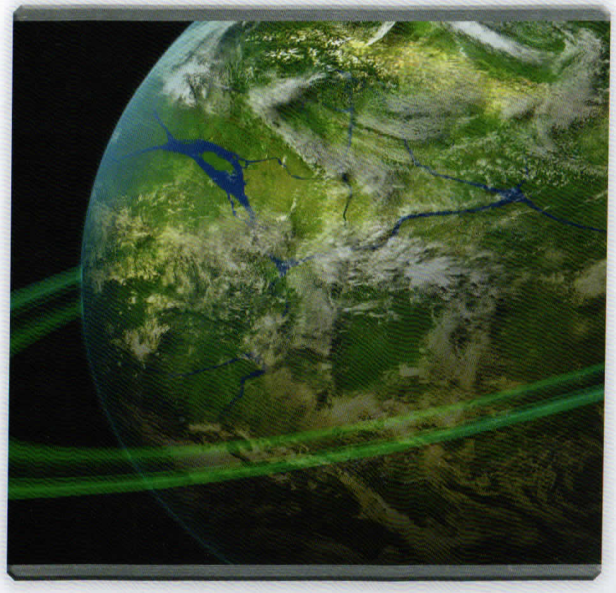
The secondary inhabited planets of Eden II and IV were captured early in the campaign as enemy presence there was light and stood little chance against the might of the armada. The last remaining pocket of Scourge presence elsewhere in the system, buried deep in the titanium mines of Eden VII, are still under sustained nuclear bombardment. This initiative was championed by Admiral Kronstein in an effort to save a costly surface assault beyond the mine's value, since all enemy missile defences have long since been destroyed.

The system of Eden Prime was officially declared conquered on January 1st, 2672, despite these last few pockets of resistance. Such a pronouncement was desperately needed to maintain morale both at home and in other theatres, as the forces of the UCM battle fierce opposition and contend with setbacks at every turn.

The UCMA has now successfully raised the first Colonial Legion from a Cradle World, the Eden 1st – recruited from ex-resistance fighters. This is only the beginning of the contributions such a prize as Eden Prime will likely contribute to the war effort, the most pressing of which being raw material extraction for shipbuilding as the yards of Niccolum are always thirsty for more.

Battlefleet Eden is now a shadow its former self, with only a small garrison fleet remaining in place to support the final assault on New Athens, bombard Eden VII and guard the system from potential enemy incursions. Shaltari interference is still prevalent and rare encounters with the PHR do occur. No signs of Scourge vessels have been reported and it seems likely that the enemy has accepted Colonial control of the system for the time being, given their heavy commitment in other theatres.

ELYSIUM SYSTEM



JANUARY 27TH, 2672, D+423 (THEATRE), D+600 (RECONQUEST)

The Cradle World of Elysium Prime was the second major beachhead of the Reconquest, an operation which began with a customarily immense assault on November 30th 2670, this theatre's D-Day. As the most productive agricultural world known to man, Elysium Prime was reasoned to be just as crucial a bread basket for the enemy as it had been for humanity. Denying this vast source of carbohydrate to the millions upon millions of Scourge hosts on other planets was seen as a vital objective early in the Reconquest.

The initial drop of five million combat troops in addition to multitudes of support personnel was completed in the first 72 hours of the invasion. An estimated 150 million human beings in total took part in some way during the first week – a much smaller figure than on Eden Prime since enemy presence was proportionally lighter and the UCM now had commitments in multiple theatres to contend with.

All Scourge void assets were wiped out within days of Battlefleet Elysium jumping to the system, although from the 5th day, the Shaltari had been making persistent and disruptive hit and run attacks in the theatre. These attacks were clearly focused towards disrupting UCM activities on the ground and slowing progress, causing great frustration to both the Admiralty and AHQ. Despite the delivery of an increased compliment of fast frigates fresh from Nicollum's yards, the UCMF failed for some time to bring the aliens to a decisive battle.

The Elysium system does not contain any secondary planets of real note besides the gemstone mining colonies annihilated during the original Scourge invasion. These have been in Colonial hands since the early stages of the campaign but are a low priority for reconstruction as such decorative foibles are unimportant in wartime.

Due to pressing developments in other theatres, the ground forces of the Elysium campaign received few reinforcements and had to contend with attritional losses and battle fatigue on a routine basis. The enemy were largely confined to the cities and the High Council deemed that the troops deployed were sufficient to get the job done. Encircled in the capital city of Triticum, the bulk of the defending Scourge forces launched an enormous breakout on October 31st, aided by well concealed strike forces from without.

This resulted in the Great Battle of Triticum Plains, so far the largest tank battle of the Reconquest.

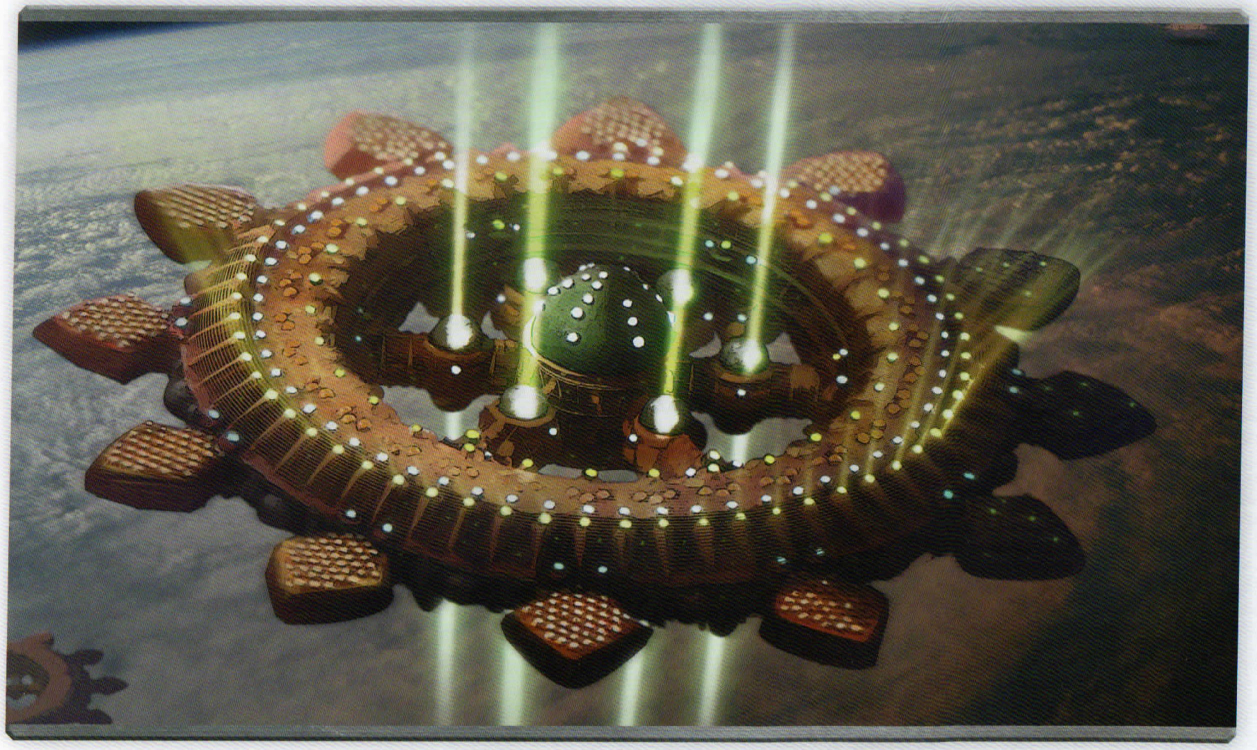
Despite being temporarily outnumbered, tired and poorly supplied, the local forces acquitted themselves with bravery and fortitude despite appalling losses. Several Armoured Corps were rushed by road and dropship to plug the vast gap as tides of enemy grav-tanks poured out of the city. Despite these reinforcements, the battle would certainly have gone the enemy's way were it not for the timely intervention of Battlefleet Elysium.

Ships under the command of Admiral Tokairo raced to low orbit above the vast battlefield and began to conduct a masterly bombardment operation against the now exposed enemy, dealing grievous damage. However, before the tide could be turned fully, the largest Shaltari fleet yet to engage the UCM in the Reconquest intervened. Although this force broke the bombardment, it proved insufficient to gain control of the battlespace and many alien ships were finally destroyed, marking the demise of Shaltari pirate activity in the theatre to this day.

Unfortunately, their intervention gave Scourge ground forces an even field, resulting in massive losses on both sides. In total, twelve entire Armoured Corps were reduced to tattered remnants and, in addition to casualties in the legions over 700,000 UCM fighting troops met their deaths with a further 50,000 sailors lost. In addition to casualties in other theatres, this was the second most costly day in the Reconquest so far in terms of sheer loss of life, behind only the nuclear atrocity on Eden Prime.

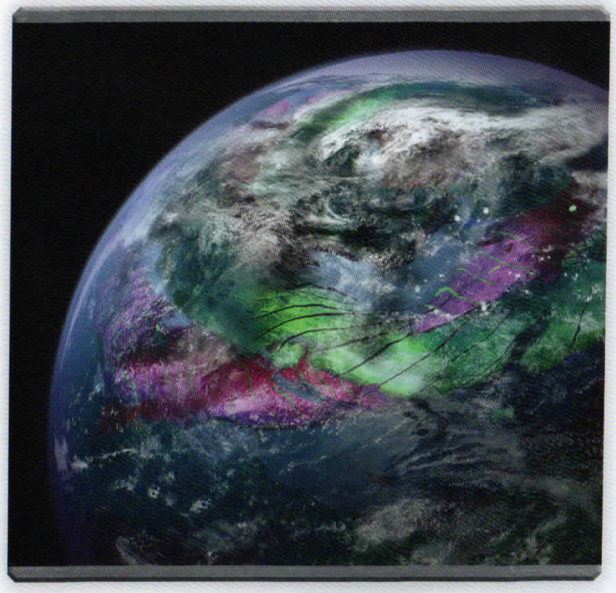
With the final annihilation of this vast Scourge armoured force, the formal capture of Triticum and the subsequent capture of Granum City, the Cradle World system of Elysium Prime was finally declared conquered on January 20th, 2672. Small pockets of Scourge and feral human resistance groups remain on Elysium Prime, but the planet is essentially in Colonial hands.

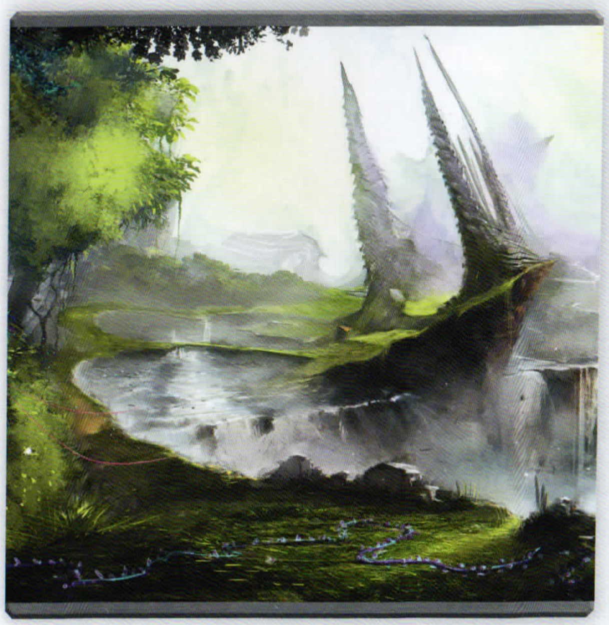
A large concentration of Elysium Prime's victorious armies are even now being lifted off planet to be redeployed elsewhere in the Reconquest, where they are sorely needed. Battlefleet Elysium is being further reduced also, with most elements being sent to bolster the battered Battlefleet Olympus in its ongoing struggle. It has been determined that a garrison force above the pre-determined level should remain however, given previous Shaltari involvement in the sector combined with recent sightings of PHR and Scourge recon patrols.



SHANGRI-LA SYSTEM

JANUARY 27TH, 2672, D+355 (THEATRE), D+600 (RECONQUEST)





The Cradle World of Shangri-La was once the centre of the tourist trade for affluent human society before the Scourge invasion. This stunningly beautiful planet is replete with breathtaking scenery, sumptuous plant life and dazzling multitudes of mostly harmless fauna. Almost its entire surface is evenly peppered with the small spaceports and luxury hotel complexes that once served over two billion tourists a year. Since their invasion, the Scourge have been using many of these spaceports to serve mining assets which have been scaring the planet's beautiful surface to exploit the vast mineral wealth beneath.

Shangri-La has no major cities, minimal orbital infrastructure and had a relatively light Scourge garrison (for a Cradle World). This made it a viable third target for the Reconquest, given that both the Eden and Elysium campaigns were still ongoing at the time of Shangri-La's D-Day, Feb 5th, 2671.

The major challenge for the ground campaign was dominating and holding the thousands of small 'island' like battlefields that emerged, since each spaceport complex was isolated by miles of impassable jungle. Throughout the campaign, the UCMA have been frustrated in being unable to confine the Scourge to concentrations as on Eden and Elysium. Even defining where the enemy lines were proved almost impossible.

As a result, the highest dropship per-capita ratio in the Reconquest was required for troops here, in conjunction with extensive strike carrier and troopship support since the only viable means of moving troops was (and still is) by air or orbit.

Safe use of such assets is only possible with void supremacy, and as such Battlefleet Shangri-La was focused on eliminating Scourge fleet assets early in the campaign.

However, the enemy had learned some lessons about being outnumbered since Eden and Elysium, so Scourge fleets were far harder to bring to battle. A masterly hit and run campaign by the enemy frustrated the UCMF, turning the void war into a slow moving quagmire.

However, by late September 2671, superior Colonial numbers had taken their toll on the tenacious defenders. In order to finally put an end to the enemy fleet's asymmetric warfare campaign and rid the system of their foul presence, the Admiralty gathered Battlefleet Shangri-La for a concerted system wide sweep and kill operation.

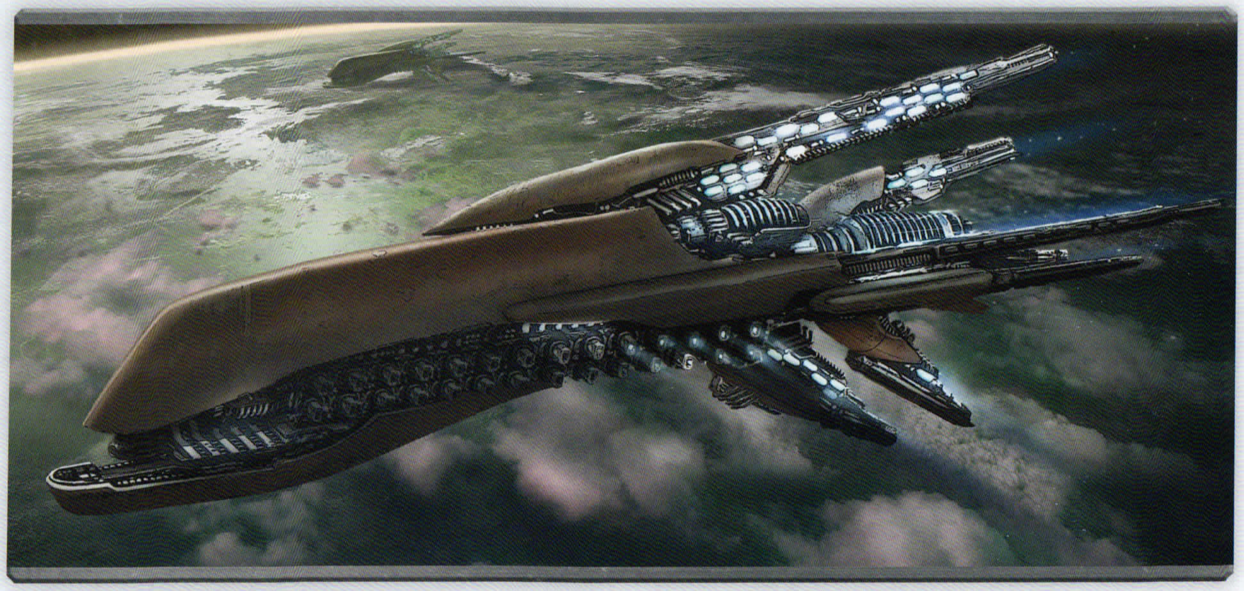
On the 8th of October, the balance of naval power in the system took a dramatic shift. While the majority of Battlefleet Shangri-La was distant from the Cradle World conducting the sweep, warning sensors were triggered around the outer markers. After swift interrogation of the data, it was revealed that the largest PHR fleet yet to trouble the UCM had jumped into the system and were racing for Shangri-La. No coordinated response of any significance could possibly have been brought to bear in time, and the little protection the planet had in orbit was swept aside.

The PHR began landing operations at multiple obscure sites across the planet, its ground forces slaying UCM and Scourge defenders alike with merciless efficiency. The Republic mostly had the skies to itself for the first 72 hours, as it took that long for the thinly spread and poorly positioned Battlefleet Shangri-La to reform into a viable opposing force. The next week saw several attempts to bring the PHR to battle although all failed due to possible advance warning of UCM activities. It has always been said that the Republic has a peerless intelligence network, a fact borne out by the UCMF's frustrations in pinning the enemy down.

Despite the total surprise achieved by the PHR and over a week of orbital superiority, casualties for the UCM were surprisingly light. It was obvious to the Admiralty that destruction of Colonial assets was not the PHR's objective in system, but rather whatever they were pursuing on the ground. Several more weeks of skirmishing and naval manoeuvre followed, with many small engagements reported but none large enough to go down in the history books.

As the enemy began to withdraw from some of their dropsites, they relinquished control of the void above them to the UCM without a fight. However, they defended ground troops still in place with tenacity and extreme force. Since the UCM still had many Scourge concentrations on the surface to deal with, the Admiralty could never concentrate fully on ousting the Grand Fleet's vessels from the system. Ground troops need constant support in this theatre and since the PHR seemed unconcerned with UCM activities distant from their dropsites, the surface war against the Scourge continued. In addition, the surviving Scourge fleet assets in the system were not idle during the respite provided by the PHR's incursion and used this time to repair, reorganise and to begin striking back at the UCM. This forced the Admiralty to focus on the Scourge as the main threat, since the PHR's operations were confined to localised areas and were not focused directly at the UCM.

However, 23 days after they launched their attacks, the PHR drove the Admiralty and indeed all UCM citizens in the sector into a fury. A reinforcement wave en-route to an emerging surface battle against the Scourge near one of the PHR dropsites was brutally attacked and entirely wiped out by an unknown force, assumed to be PHR. Losses included the troopships Home Zeal, Tidebringer and Candle of Aurum, and thus the deaths of 75,000 Legionnaires in addition to thousands of sailors of the UCMF. The fact that this force was not directed at the PHR caused great anger. Speculation that this may have been an error on the part of the usually well informed Republic was ignored, as were missives from the Grand Fleet claiming innocence in the act.



The UCM's soldiers now demanded blood in a cacophony which could not be silenced and it would be up to the UCMF to give it to them.

On November 9th, the Admiralty at last agreed to a full force response against the PHR incursion after considered and heated debate. Further Republic troops had since withdrawn from the surface, and so the merits of this response were, strategically speaking, few. Most analysts agreed that the PHR would be leaving the system entirely in a matter of weeks and argued that punitive attacks in the name of vengeance would not serve the purpose of the Reconquest in any meaningful way, playing into the hands of the Scourge. Such logic was buried in hatred for the PHR, perhaps a culmination of months of their interference in the war as a whole.

The UCM's offensive began with a fresh and final demand that the PHR quit the system immediately, an order which was once more disdainfully dismissed out of hand, since the Republic's mission on Shangri-La was incomplete.

As the UCM taskforce (including three Tokyo class bombardment battleships) approached the last remaining major PHR dropsite, the foe vowed to stand and fight. Directing vessels with deft skill, the PHR's Grand Director Octavia Rhee reformed her fleet into a defensive formation ready to receive the attack. Her opposite number, High Admiral Johannas Stern drove his force into this wall of mighty ships, joining battle on November 12th, 2671.

This action remains the largest and most costly UCM vs PHR engagement in the Reconquest to date and quickly entered the annals of the UCMF's Naval Academy training manual as 'Johannas' Folly'. It became a textbook example of PHR naval tactics and how to fail to deal with them. The High Admiral's eagerness to get to grips with the enemy inexcusably exposed his ships breaking the enemy defence line to double-broadside fire, suffering grievous losses in the first wave. A second wave was thrown into the maelstrom shortly afterwards, with Stern believing the enemy crippled by the first, since they had been hit mercilessly on the UCM's approach.

Such an assumption proved a gross underestimate of the sheer toughness of PHR vessels, a fact which the High Admiral paid for dearly in ships.

However, late in the battle the UCM's superiority of numbers began to tell. In a final and brave defence of her dropsite, Grand Director Octavia Rhee went down with her ship, the Heracles class battleship Hammer of Reason. With their commanding officer killed and fleet battered, her successor ordered an immediate retreat. While Rhee's sacrifice allowed some of the surface force to be extracted, large concentrations of PHR ground troops were left behind.

However, the destruction of all three Tokyo class bombardment ships by successive PHR bomber waves gave these troops time to melt into the jungle and avoid orbital reprisals. To this day, large numbers of PHR ground troops remain at large on Shangri-La to trouble the UCM and attempt to complete their mysterious objectives without orbital support or reinforcement. However, since this force is commanded by Aurellia Felix, one of the PHR's most illustrious commanders who insisted in remaining behind, their potency cannot be ignored.

This was a pyrrhic victory for the UCM, resulting in the loss of 35 capital ships including six battleships, 45,000 lives and Johannas Stern's immediate court martial. His successor must now grapple with the continuing Scourge guerrilla activity in the void as well as the expected PHR rescue attempt for their isolated ground forces. This ill-advised engagement ultimately resulted in further delays in the final capture of Shangri-La, a death trap far more challenging to conquer outright than the UCM ever envisaged. While the PHR's actions outside this disastrous battle caused few casualties, it did delay the planned surface attacks on Helen and Persephone, the system's two major secondary planets. Strikes against the massive Scourge breeding hives there are now scheduled to commence in the coming days.

Captain Horenz of the Moscow class heavy cruiser *UCMS Revenge* strode the screen-laden chaos of CIC in a foul temper. Staring up at Shangri-La's orbital visualisation holo-display, he wondered for the umpteenth time how his theoretically competent crew had been hoodwinked by an enemy formation so easily.

"Enemy disposition? Position? Nature? Got anything for me at all Jenkins..? WELL?" he asked in a growing but still icy rage. Molten anger was bubbling away at his control, but he held it back for now, it wouldn't do to lose it in front of his staff.

"Seven ships sir, unlogged return patterns, certainly non-Scourge. Average signature and low disparate energy readout, not Shaltari, so most likely PHR sir. Two minutes then they'll be on us. More than that sir I can't guess."

"Thank you," breathed the captain, "bring us to battle quarters immediately. Charge weapons, raise support section bulkheads. Brace for impact. They'll hit us before we're fully capable. Bring the engines to yield, we may yet be able to dodge our way out of the worst of it."

"Aye aye, sir... Weapons fire, port bow!"

"Don't sweat it. Untargeted surely, they're just playing with us. Stay cool, it's likely just..." The captain's words fell on suddenly terrified ears, as a colossal, booming crash echoed through CIC, sending some young officers to their chairs. Most gripped anything in reach with genuine terror, even the more experienced members of the bridge crew were jumpy.

"Damage report?" the captain asked in stony tones.

"Glancing hit, port bow, deck 17. Several sections venting but minimal casualties. Systems 95% operative. Second volley incoming... BRACE BRACE!" A fresh cacophony rang through CIC, this time far worse. Everyone not already holding onto something now was. Fingers whitened as the anticipated carnage drew close.

"Port bow again, decks 18 through 21, bow engineering 6 and 7 are vented, all hands sir. Multiple fires, no major loss of function though. Routing power from sections and preparing to purge," intoned chief engineer Watkins, just about the only other calm person on the bridge, though even her icy demeanour was starting to show cracks.

"Understood Watkins. The rest of you, CALM!" shouted the captain, "I need you all functional if we're to make it through this. For many of you, this is your first taste of real combat, but I've had two damn ships shot from under me and I'm damn sure this won't be the third. Do I have engines?"

"Coming to yield... almost there..." gasped chief drive officer Simpkins, "There! Orders sir?"

"Helm, take us 30° starboard with 10° rise. Roll us full 180 and prepare the drives for full-stress burn on my mark increasing turn to 70°." A sudden chilling silence filled CIC, the tension palpable. "MARK!" As the captain barked the order, a sudden lurch tugged the crew to one side, the harshness of the manoeuvre momentarily overcoming the *Revenge's* inertial compensators. As the vast ship turned and rolled, an enormous broadside salvo from the closest enemy vessel seared past the lower keel, taking a few comms masts with it but with no further damage.

"Main turrets charged?"

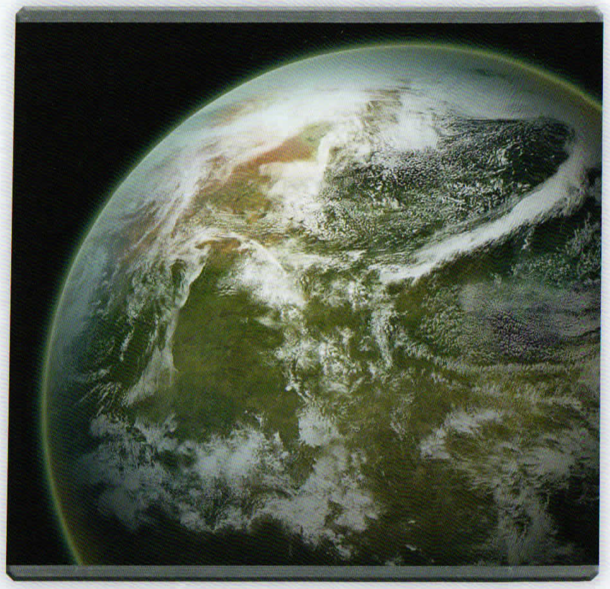
"Aye sir!" cried chief gunnery officer Petrov.

"Good. Fire at will Nicolai." As the captain gave the order, a distant, barely perceptible chorus of ringing vibrations passed through the walls of CIC, the only physical sign that millions of joules of kinetic death had just been unleashed. The captain often considered this an issue for the bridge crew who were detached and isolated from the terrible forces at work in space combat...

Without warning, a tank sized chunk of metal tore through CIC, ripping every one of its instantly dead crew after it and into the cold dark blackness of space.

OLYMPUS SYSTEM

JANUARY 27TH, 2672, D-28 (THEATRE), D+600 (RECONQUEST)



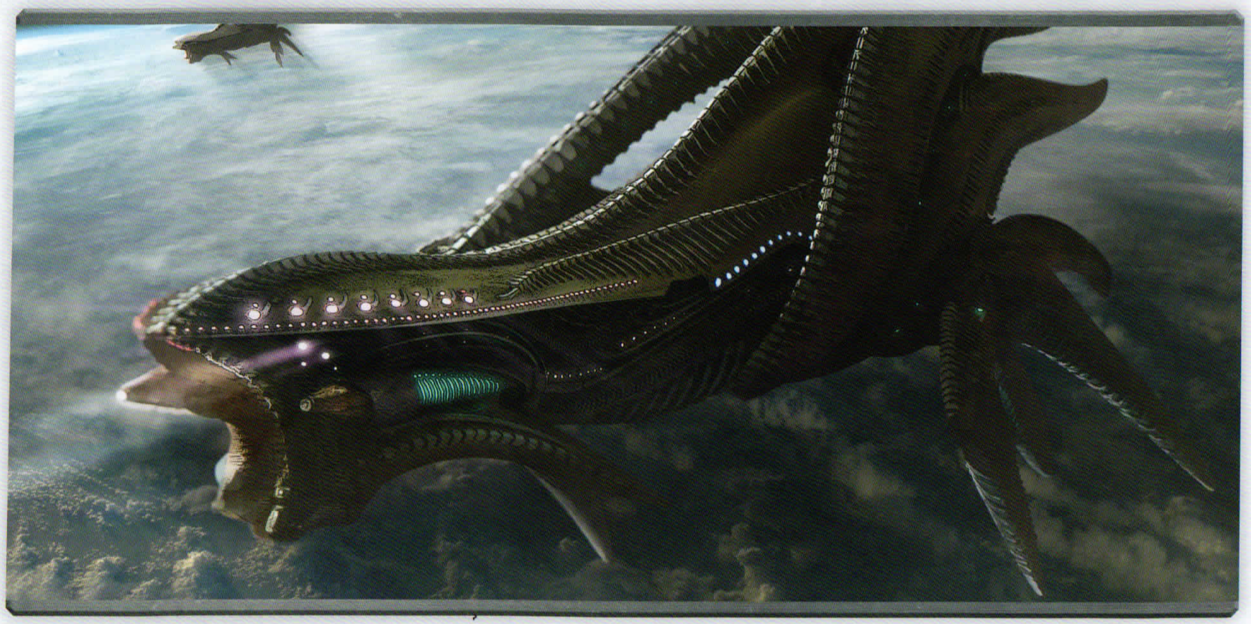
Olympus Prime was once mankind's foremost factory planet and had the most abundant resources of any of the bountiful Cradle Worlds. Everything from tanks to pre-fabricated structures were built here as billions of tons of ore, hydrocarbons and precious minerals were extracted from its many mines every year.

The planet also featured the most extensive orbital instillations of all the Cradle Worlds, with a total tonnage eclipsed only by Earth itself. Much of this colossal resource was given over to starship construction, making it mankind's premier shipyard before the invasion. These sprawling orbiting factories, stretching seemingly endlessly into the void, were kept in place and used by the Scourge in the wake of their conquest – making them prized assets for acquisition to this day.

These factors made Olympus Prime a crucial strategic objective for the Reconquest. However, due to the sheer scale of its hijacked orbital grid and the Scourge armada in place to protect it, an equally vast force would be needed to crush the alien foe. The largest fleet assembled by the UCM since D-Day on Eden Prime was formed up and unleashed on Olympus Prime on February 1st, 2671, jumping immediately to the planet's outer marker. Their first objective would be to wipe out the enemy fleet and capture the orbitals, since the defence grid was so powerful as to render D-Day utterly impossible with it in enemy hands.

Unlike other theatres however, the enemy opposition in the void would prove equal to the enormous force sent to crush it, creating the first true test for the might of the UCMF. The Scourge stood their ground and fought viciously in a titanic engagement that lasted a full eighteen days. For some reason, the Scourge had chosen this place to make a stand against their aggressors, deploying external reinforcements for the first time; wave after wave of fresh ships hurled into the battlespace from other systems, many from Earth itself.

So began the Battle of Olympus, a monumental airless confrontation that blotted the voidspace of the planet with warships, debris and frozen corpses. The first nine days saw monumental carnage, with the UCMF losing over 120 capital ships including 32 battleships and three dreadnoughts and suffering well over 650,000 naval casualties. The second nine days of aftermath skirmishing caused Colonial losses to pass beyond six hundred vessels of frigate tonnage of above and a total of almost a million sailors injured or killed.



Reinforcements were rushed in from other theatres throughout the battle as ships joined Battlefleet Olympus in its epic struggle. Both sides threw fresh meat to the grinder throughout these tumultuous eighteen days, the consequences of failure elevated by the scale of the engagement.

Such was the devastation that the Admiralty later grudgingly concluded that it could no longer count on certain numerical superiority in the near future. However, planners had anticipated a major void confrontation with the Scourge in the Reconquest's first year and had hundreds of ships already in construction on Nicollum, projected to be completed by 2673, with many more commissioned. In addition, most indicators suggest that the enemy is feeling its losses just as keenly due to the lack of stronger opposition in other theatres and the reduction in Earth's defence fleet. This last factor in particular may be crucial in the coming years of the Reconquest, when the critics decrying this battle as a 'cruel waste of ships' may just be silenced.

In any event, the Battle of Olympus finally went the UCMF's way, with the Scourge at last retreating bloodied and battered into the shadows, leaving the mauled remnants of Battlefleet Olympus to face the next task in this campaign. With D-Day still impossible, intel gathering and capture or destruction of the orbital defence grid became a crucial priority. This vastly complex network was controlled by a series of redundant systems on the surface, aboard the orbitals and on Styx moon.

An unfortunate side effect of the gargantuan battle was to litter the orbit of Olympus Prime, graveyard of a thousand ships, with wreckage. The sheer quantity of debris circling the planet made the use of small, lightly armoured voidcraft unsafe in the extreme. This included the UCMA's bulk landers, making surface assaults possible only by strike carrier and thus not in the numbers necessary for a full invasion. Since many of the derelicts were wrecked at combat speed (gravity nulled and well below unpowered orbital velocity) much of this detritus had burned up by the end of the year, opening up the possibility of full scale ground assault only recently.

The enemy's actions shifted after this battle towards their familiar asymmetric warfare, hit and run style mode of fighting that the Scourge remnants have become so infamously good at. However, while their actions remained a constant threat and served to further delay D-Day, Battlefleet Olympus was further bolstered, maintaining it as the largest of the Colonial Battlefleets into 2672.

With the element of surprise long since lost in this theatre, the UCM's preparations for D-Day would need to be meticulous and well planned. Strike carrier incursions were underway from late in 2671, since only they could punch through the debris fields successfully. These were mostly surgical strikes against the surface-based defence grid control stations, as full scale orbital bombardment was rendered impractical by the sheer amount of debris and interference. The attacks were largely successful albeit grievously costly in lives, leading to some of the highest percentage casualty rates in the Reconquest's many surface operations.

Strike carriers were also instrumental in the capture of a string of vast orbital instillations through the daring landings of dropships directly onto them, once within their dock's artificial atmospheric bubbles. Colonial forces conducted a skilful leapfrog along these vast edifices, never exposing themselves to overlapping fire from the core of the reefs by meticulously working from the extremities towards the centre. Today, 55% of the orbitals are in Colonial hands, with 35% necessarily destroyed or disabled and victory on Styx moon achieved. This puts the target of 95% acquisition or destruction tantalisingly close, from which point an invasion will be possible without unconscionable bulk lander losses from defence fire. Currently, a tentative date for D-Day has been set for February 24th, a mere 28 days' time. The High Council is impatient to finally begin landings and as such, final victory against the orbitals is essential.

Scourge ground assets on the system's other viable planets, Olympus II, V and IX, have faced the punishment of UCM orbital bombardment since the enemy fleet was routed. With such actions difficult and imprecise over Olympus Prime due to the debris, this was deemed the best use of ships such as the Madrid and mighty Tokyo classes, since they could flatten these assets with near impunity. Such operations are unglamorous and regrettable due to loss of infrastructure, but deemed necessary in the face of the other challenges in this theatre.

A final complication for the coming invasion is the presence of the PHR in and around Olympus Prime's capital, Asphodel City. Republic forces have been in place and battling the Scourge here since the early days of the UCM's campaign in the theatre, having apparently run the Scourge blockade in the confusion of the Battle of Olympus. Since their deployment, these forces have been largely without orbital assistance and battling for six distinct (and to the UCM's assessment worthless) sectors within the capital.

Several Marine Force Recon (MF-R) teams were sent by Naval Intelligence just over 100 days ago to attempt to ascertain the PHR's purpose here and possibly shed light on their operations elsewhere. These teams are currently still in the field under strict radio silence (given technological aptitude of the PHR) but are due to return to orbit and report back to the highest levels within days.

Many are anxiously awaiting any information regarding the troubling involvement of the PHR in this already death-ridden theatre. With Shaltari incursions on the rise, Scourge attacks continuing and preparations for invasion underway, the sense of impending slaughter of biblical proportions is palpable and building. The enemy on the ground are well dug in and prepared for the firestorm to come, leading many to warn that Olympus' long awaited D-Day will be the bloodiest in Colonial history.

AARU SYSTEM

JANUARY 27TH, 2672, D-UNSPECIFIED (THEATRE), D+600 (RECONQUEST)

Aaru is an unusual Cradle World in that it orbits its sun alone, with no other planets, moons or asteroid belts to complicate this simplest of systems. It is also unique among its kind in that its entire surface appears to be a barren, arid wasteland. However, beneath the sands lies a vast, planet-wide network of caverns of such monumental scale that they have their own temperate climate and weather patterns, lit by bioluminescence from myriad native life forms.

These caverns have always made Aaru an exceptional and challenging prospect for any military planner. The largest consideration for the High Council when planning the Reconquest was the projected minimal effectiveness of orbital bombardment, as almost all meaningful enemy assets were beneath the surface and far from such harm. The planet's capture would need to be almost exclusively a ground war and likely a bloody one, since the enemy could not be softened up by bombardment first.

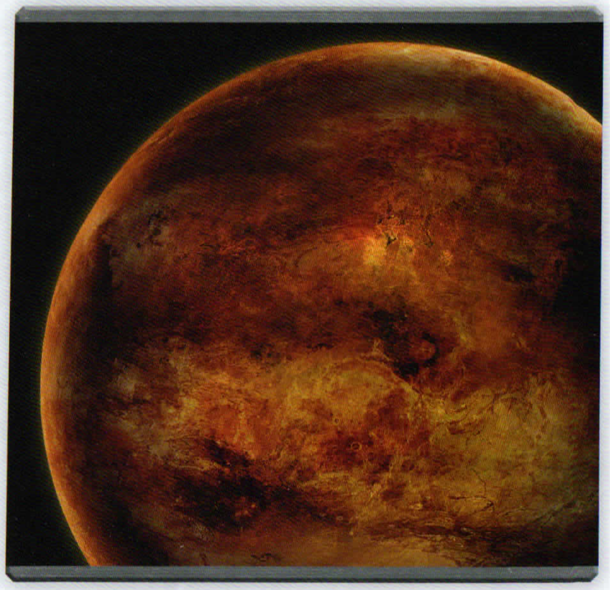
In a counter consideration, Aaru's caverns are less than ideal places for the Scourge to operate, since they do not tend to stray far from their largest constructs, a working distance shortened significantly by solid barriers such as rock. This is currently assumed to be a communications issue, its practical effect being that this planet has an unusually prolific and active Resistance population, able to operate beyond the range of Scourge patrols deep within the caverns.

As a result of these factors, it was decided late in 2671 not to launch a full scale invasion of Aaru at this stage of the Reconquest, and instead focus on mobilising and utilising the resistance population in a guerrilla campaign. While deeply unpopular with the UCM expeditionary forces on the ground, such a choice was deemed unavoidable in the wake of the setbacks in other systems.

It its past, Aaru was the site of mankind's only true war with the Shaltari. Long before the Scourge invasion and during this world's seeding with humanity, a tribe now known as the Mongols took offense to humanity being introduced on Aaru by another tribe (once ironically known as the 'Friends', now known as the Apache). This led to a bitter war with the Mongols, once the Apache had left without fighting for either side. Although the humans took massively disproportionate losses (estimated at 60:1), their technology even more inferior in those days, the Mongols eventually relented and retreated due to insufficient numbers.

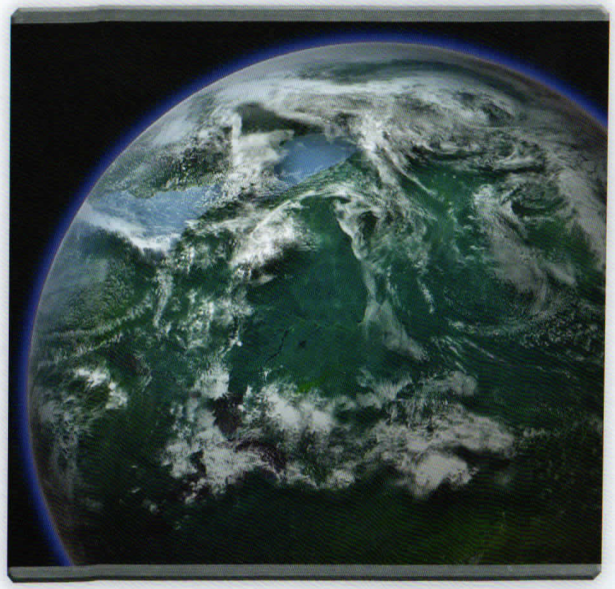
Today, a Shaltari tribal coalition led by the Mongols is mounting the largest military effort they have ever been observed conducting in an apparent attempt to take Aaru. A sizeable Shaltari warfleet had been operating in the system for some time and limited ground operations were underway throughout 2671, although their involvement in the theatre has escalated substantially in 2672.

UCM analysts are increasingly of the opinion that the tribes may even have enough forces in place to conquer the planet, especially in light of the reduced Scourge void presence after ships were siphoned off to fight at Olympus Prime. That this planet has significance to the Shaltari race beyond that of any other known world is beyond doubt, as is the fact that conquest of this already challenging world has become a distant prospect.



ASGARD SYSTEM

JANUARY 27TH, 2672, D-UNSPECIFIED (THEATRE), D+600 (RECONQUEST)



The Cradle World of Asgard Prime was once mankind's premier armour and tank manufacturer, exceeding even Olympus Prime in those industries. Vast metal seams and uniquely dense titanium and tungsten deposits made this planet a perfect base for armour construction and indeed for export to other manufacturing centres in other systems. Its two moons, Valhalla and Sessrumnir once housed classified military research stations, although the nature of their work is now lost to the UCM since access to top secret information was limited after the Scourge invasion.

The Asgard system's significance made it a priority 2 objective for the Reconquest. A large scale recon operation was launched on January 28th, 2671, with an initial expeditionary force of 8000 men and light armoured support dropped by strike carrier tasked with establishing links with the local resistance groups to help coordinate an invasion. A small fleet presence was employed to screen this deployment for the first 24 hours only, with the strike carriers briefed to depart the system by January 31st or earlier if Scourge patrols reacted to this small force.

Regrettably, on January 30th, an unforeseen factor shattered this operation before it really began. It transpired that the resistance groups set to liaise with the expeditionary force were in fact in league with the PHR, and perpetrated a coordinated betrayal of their new UCM 'allies' once they were on the ground. A PHR fleet surprise attack also destroyed every single strike carrier before the Scourge even lifted a finger, with only a few small Lysander class lighters making it past the Republic assault group. The resistance ground forces deactivated all three of their foldspace nodes shortly afterwards, making it impossible for the UCM to return to the Asgard system as they had not laid one of their own since arriving in system - an unconscionable lapse made a court martial offense after this incident.

Only one of these ships, the *Leprechaun*, made it to the outer marker to jump away and bring confused and shell-shocked word back to the Admiralty and AHQ. Sometime later, the pre-war civilian foldspace yacht *Proud Servant* was discovered drifting badly damaged into Nicollum voidspace. A message from Colonel S. Hellburn, highest ranking survivor of the betrayal was discovered aboard, along with the corpse of the ship's only occupant, an Army Air and Space Corps pilot apparently killed by shrapnel from shipfire. This message revealed that although 3000 of his men (and senior officer) were killed in the first 24 hours, the Colonel had managed to reform a viable force of 5000 in the swamps outside the city of Odinsburg, demonstrating masterful tactical acumen.

This force's only mission, Colonel Hellburn declared, was to find and reactivate at least one of the nodes, thus allowing the UCM to return to the Asgard system and affect a rescue of his stranded forces. Far more important than the lives of this small force would be the re-opening of the system to potential Colonial invasion, such is its value to the greater war effort.

Unfortunately, almost a year after the betrayal there are still no signs of a node reactivation on Asgard Prime and the system remains closed to the UCM. Forces are on standby for immediate jump should a window present itself. Speculation remains rife as to whether Colonel Hellburn and his men are still alive in addition to ruminations of the PHR's purposes in this highly efficient and well orchestrated action against Colonial designs in this mysterious system.

TLALOCAN SYSTEM

JANUARY 27TH, 2672, D-UNSPECIFIED (THEATRE), D+600 (RECONQUEST)

The Tlalocan system is unique among its peers in that it does not have a single Cradle World, but rather a collection of four verdant and habitable moons orbiting a massive red gas giant. Combined, these moons offer a similar level of materiel abundance and living space as a planet such as Eden Prime.

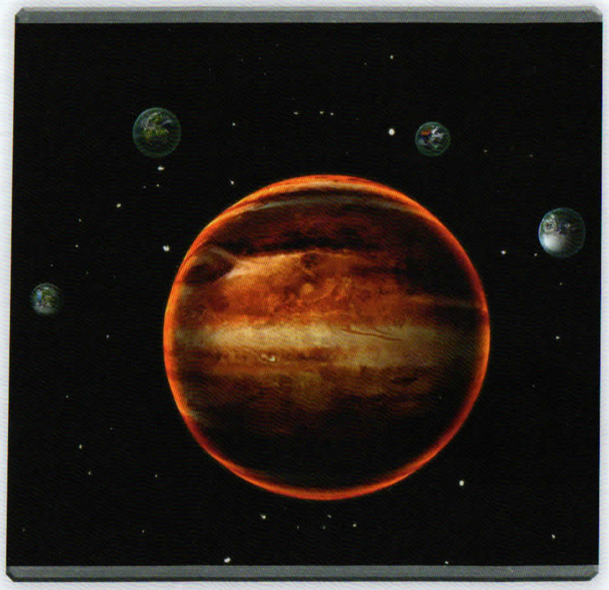
This theatre was closed to the UCM and thought lost to mankind forever at the outbreak of the Reconquest, since no functioning foldspace nodes were active there, unlike every other Cradle World system. However, a highly classified Office of Naval Intelligence Station Black initiative to discover the location of the PHR's homeworld/s produced the unexpected result of opening the system to the UCM.

An ONI operative (Specialist Joan Harper) managed to infiltrate the PHR cruiser *Mind of Asimov* carrying a top secret device known as 'Package Alpha'. This was a miniaturised foldspace node which could be carried in a standard soldier's backpack, as opposed to regular portable units which require six men to lift. In addition to being fiendishly difficult to produce, this device was limited to a five seconds transmit time before its fuel cell burned out, limiting its usefulness in that a ship must be standing by and ready to jump the moment it's activated. As part of the operation, the elite Marine Force Recon Black, Team 5 (MF-B5) aboard the Lysander class stealth lighter *Blue Shade* were standing by, and jumped to the location of the *Mind of Asimov* as soon as she translated, in the hope of following to its mysterious home port. Sadly, specialist Harper was compromised and presumably killed minutes after she activated her device.

This destination revealed itself to be the Tlalocan Moons Cradle World system, into which *Blue Shade* immediately deployed a void-based stealth node, allowing future UCM assets with the correct classified codes to follow. Their initial observations were staggering, revealing a vast PHR armada in the throes of a full scale invasion of the entire system. As the blasted wreckage of countless Scourge vessels was detected, the sheer size of the force became apparent as over 200 capital ships including 17 battleships were sighted in addition to swarms of smaller ships. It had not previously been thought that the Grand Fleet could summon up such a force, so staggering was this commitment. Team 5 returned to the Tlalocan system shortly after giving their report on October 2nd, 2670 to conduct a four month clandestine recon op of PHR activities.

Only the highest circles of the UCM's government and military could make use of this intel however, as its revelation would require the exposure of the Package Alpha program, along with a number of other clandestine initiatives. In addition, it was decided early on to restrict access to Level 6 and above only, as it would only serve to demoralise the lower ranks. With the new node's codes only accessible through ONI and MF-B, the UCM's military as a whole remained unaware of this worrying development.

By February 10th, 2671 the Director of the ONI's Naval Theories Dept, Admiral Chang, petitioned the President personally under Level 7 secrecy protocol for the immediate dispatch of Teams 6 and 9 to ascertain the fate of Team 5, who had failed to report back. Gut instinct and the fact of the PHR's uncanny foreknowledge of UCM invasions and operations such as Team 5's insertion led Admiral Chang to conclude that the Republic had at least one spy privy to Level 6 classification access, the highest level to include the High Council, behind only the Presidential one. The potential of enemy infiltrator/s on the High Council itself was troubling in the extreme and kept within select circles.

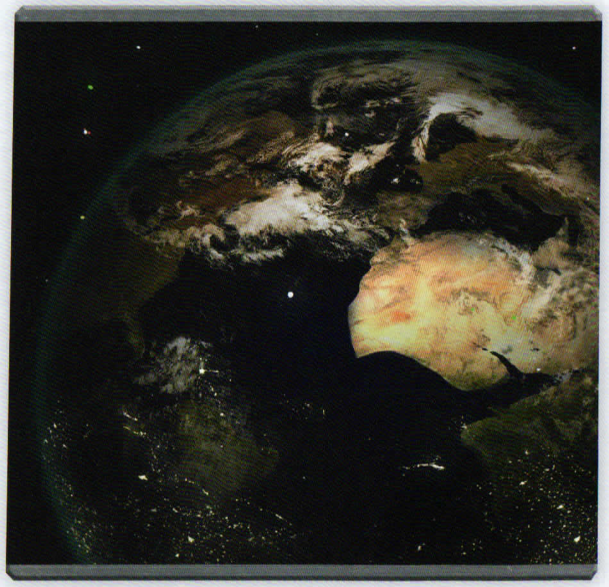


Teams 6 and 9 reported back in early September 2671, with Team 6 returning several fascinating PHR tech specimens for Science Division on October 12th. At this point, the Republic was entering the final stages of its colossal invasion of the system, with a strength estimated at 60% of materiel and 30% of the manpower of a typical UCM invasion and having been almost completely successful in just over a year. Since the UCM were heavily committed in other theatres, the President, Supreme Admiral, Supreme Marshal and Naval Theories Director all concluded that the UCM must accept Republic control of the system for the present.

MF-B Teams 11 and 13 were dispatched on November 2nd, 2671 to continue to observe the aftermath of the conquest. PHR activities on this scale had never before been observed, and what they were conducting in the Tlalocan system would likely be something of great consequence for the war in future. Previous reports talked of the construction of surface structures and orbitals at breathtaking speed, indicating the Republic's intention to hold the system in the long term, in stark contrast to any of their other incursions on the Cradle Worlds. Teams 11 and 13 are still in theatre, with the highest echelons of the UCM anxiously awaiting the intelligence they may bring back.

SOLAR SYSTEM

JANUARY 27TH, 2672, D-UNSPECIFIED (THEATRE), D+600 (RECONQUEST)



The planet Earth is currently under the iron heel of the vile Scourge. Its surface now a horror strewn industrial nightmare, its vast pre-war population largely assimilated by the enemy and twisted to their purposes. Its upper and lower orbital lanes are teeming with alien vessels, not to mention the sprawling orbital defence archipelagos captured during their original invasion, now turned to their nefarious designs. The human homeworld is now the most heavily defended place known to man - a truly daunting challenge for the invasion that must one day come if the Reconquest is to succeed.

In spite of the vast and formidable barriers thrown up by the enemy, there is still hope that the cradle of mankind may one day be assailed with a possibility of victory. The titanic clashes over Olympus Prime and the setbacks faced by the enemy in the Elysium, Shangri-La and Tlalocan systems have slowly sapped Earth of some of its mighty garrison. In addition, many of the troops sent to attack the Colonies in the recent Scourge counter-attack originated from the home planet.

It seems that the enemy appraises any attacker's chances of taking Earth as extremely remote and as such has been siphoning off its military might to other theatres. Time will tell if this is enough to turn the tables in favour of the UCM, but pressure must surely be building on the enemy to throw further reserves into the cataclysmic battles unfolding elsewhere in its domains.

The first sorties into the Solar system were conducted by Marine Force Recon from July 2670 onwards, the reports they brought back bringing chills to the hearts of all that read them. Accounts of immense breeding hives, rank upon rank of barracks and endless streams of vehicles departing for the Galaxy's battlefronts were mixed with nightmarish resistance accounts of countless years of ceaseless hardship under occupation.

Although Earth's population had the worse evasion rate of any human world during the invasion, its unequalled population ensured that even this small percentage made up a massive underground resistance movement. Early UCM missions focused on making contact with these groups. In some cases, the emotional bonds and sense of commitment between of these new comrades were too strong to be broken by orders from distant Aurum, with several groups going AWOL rather than return to the Colonies. Most notably, Lieutenant Colonel J. Rodriguez, ranking officer on his expedition remained with the resistance, taking many of his loyal men with him.

Today, it seems this deserter is now rallying and coordinating multiple resistance factions around New York City, possibly to start an uprising ahead of any UCM invasion and strongly against the current wishes of AHQ. Two MF-R teams have been in the field in an attempt to apprehend this man, but so far with no result.

Elsewhere in the system, the picture is very different. The small pre-war populations on Saturn's and Jupiter's moons are thought entirely lost to the Scourge, with no surviving resistance groups extant. In addition, the voidspace around the moon Callisto remains a no-fly zone for the Lysander stealth lighters currently being used to reconnoitre the system. While these remarkable ships are virtually invisible to Scourge and PHR scanners as proven by extensive field use, the Lysander *Azure Night* was lost in this region of space, destroyed by a mysterious contact of non-Scourge origin. Most support the assumption that this was a Shaltari asset able to detect and target the doomed vessel. The reason for this strike is still unknown and what may be occurring on or around Callisto is a mystery, but it is deemed unsafe to attempt further sorties there until the stealth technology on the Lysanders can be improved and updated. Refits to several of these ships are scheduled to take place on Nicollum in early March, teething problems permitting.

The first true offensive in the Solar system came on November 1st, 2671 in a strike against the Scourge H2O extractors on Jupiter's moon Europa. This icy celestial body was designated as a soft but high value target, as pure Scourge require highly refined water with no biological contaminants for best function – something that this moon provided to Earth's garrison in an unending stream. Such a strike in mankind's home system was also deemed vital for civilian morale in the face of the Scourge counter attacks on the Colonies, unleashed just days earlier.

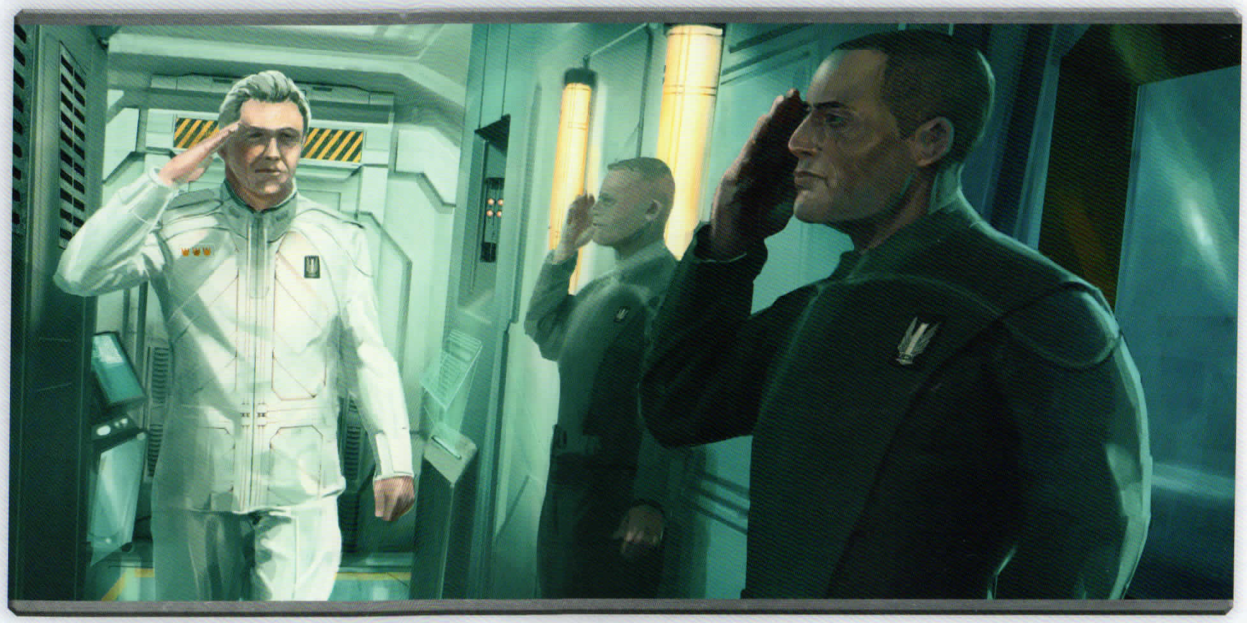
A sizable fleet of fast ships designated as Taskforce Europa was formed up around Nicollum under the guise of a live fire exercise. Its task would be to destroy Europa's H2O extraction facilities by strike carrier insertion, orbital bombardment being too slow and deeply unsubtle, tactics which would surely allow the enemy to respond with crushing force. Ground troops would enter the structures deploying by dropships, planting tactical nuclear devices before retreating and detonating them, destroying the facilities from within.

This operation proved to be a stunning success, resulting in the total destruction of all six facilities targeted in the raid. As news of a victory in the very heart of the enemy's domains broke, crowds of cheering and elated citizens gathered and celebrated through the night on all the Colonial cities not under attack and even in those recently liberated on the Cradle Worlds. Such cause for jubilation had been sorely lacking as neither the Eden or Elysium system had been declared conquered at this time. The Scourge attacks on the UCM had also struck at the heart of Colonial pride, not to mention the sense of safety at home previously imagined by its citizens.

Such a victory as was won on Europa gave mankind hope it a bleak hour - the value of such a triumph cannot therefore be overstated.

However, casualties among Taskforce Europa were appallingly high, as during their retreat to Jupiter's outer marker, they took enormous damage from Scourge pursuit which was as intensive as it was overwhelming for the light ships of the fleet. In all, only one in five members of the Taskforce, sailors and soldiers alike, returned home from the slaughter.

That this single operation saw the awarding of more Fortitude Stars (many posthumously) than in any other single operation in the Reconquest is unsurprising. Despite the questionable wisdom of the attack which will doubtless be debated by historians for generations, the Heroes of Europa will forever be etched into the collective memory of the UCM. A mighty cenotaph celebrating their deeds is even now under construction in Freedom Square, Aurum City to join those of the other legendary and bloody ventures of this Reconquest.



As he paced his opulent quarters, Vice Admiral Towers continued his inner monologue, endlessly debating with himself the merits of the operation, the risks, the rewards... The glory? *No*. He'd seen too much of war in these few short years to give a damn about glory.

That was for the fools at home to write idiot poems and eulogies about. He didn't want to be part of anyone's bloody eulogy, he wanted to live. Badly. Problem was, duty was something he cared about, and his strategic brain saw the merits of this operation, it really did. Damn his brain and his loyalty, it was leading him to his death, he knew it in his gut somehow.

"Admiral?" cracked a tremulous voice on the intercom, "It's time."

"Fine Samantha, I'll be in CIC in three. Don't want to keep those marvellous cretins from ONI waiting now do we?" As he heard an almost imperceptible chuckle on the other end of the line, his spirits lifted a little.

"Hell. Let's get this thing over with. Maybe it really *will* be parades and medals," he said to himself, sweeping his grey admiral's cloak over his shoulders.

As the Admiral strode onto the deck of his command, the Perth class battlecruiser *Liberty's Edge*, his steely glance took in the worried looks on the faces of the shipmates he knew and loved. He then picked out the stony expressions of the two most detestable weasels he'd ever had the displeasure of taking orders from.

"Ahh, Admiral, glad you could join us. A little late of course... but never mind," said the ferrety little man from the Office of Naval Intelligence that Towers had christened 'Cockroach', the only one that ever seemed to speak. "This will be the first time the UCM strikes at the enemy in our home system. An operation crucial to disrupting their equilibrium there, and, yes, for morale back home. The regrettable attack on Ferrum has been dreadful for the populous to take. This will be our answer."

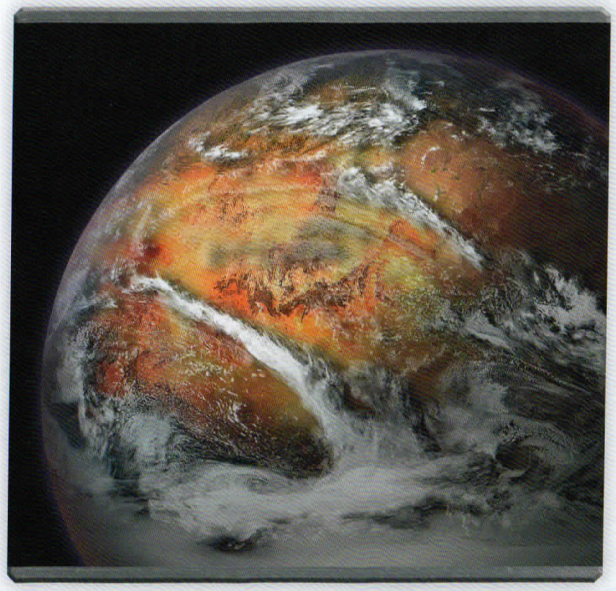
"Didn't see that one coming though did you?" said Towers in a poorly concealed whisper.

"No Admiral, we did not. Don't think for a moment that just because I got the short end of the stick when it comes to looks and demeanour, that I've less of a brain than you. I have an exceptional brain in fact, as do most of my colleagues. So keep your insults to yourself, they've no place here." With his respect grudgingly increased, the admiral gestured circumspectly for Cockroach to continue.

"We have prepared this plan for minimal commitment and maximum damage. One taskforce, fast ships only, in and out. The Scourge will outnumber you 100:1 so no amount of power will win the day. This is a lightning stab from the shadows. We anticipate low resistance on approach and relatively easy mission completion. Frankly, and do not take this as an insult, this is what my superiors care about. What you should care about, is getting out. Every enemy ship in range will want blood, and will get it most likely. Casualties on retreat to the outer marker are projected to be high. If we sent twice as many ships, we'd get the job done just the same and likely take proportionately more casualties. I'm sorry, but this is the position and those are your orders. My colleague and I will be accompanying you on this mission as specialists. Our assets have reconnoitred Europa's surface in detail and will provide you with targeting data and guidance."

"Fine then. Let's get on with it. I'll do my duty as I've always done and I've got to say, I feel comforted, truly warmed in the heart that you two mighty specimens will be at my side." The small hint of a smile suggested that, perhaps, the two eggheads had earned a little respect by putting themselves in harm's way. "Just in case, you know, we should get unlucky and not make it back... tell the brass I'd like the monument big, shiny and TALL, right in Freedom Square. So it blocks the view for those wonderful people in the Office of Morale and Media who wanted this operation so much in the first place."

FERRUM SYSTEM



JANUARY 27TH, 2672, HOME FRONT -
98 DAYS SINCE ENEMY INCURSION

The planet Ferrum is the largest and second most populous of the Colonies and the pre-eminent manufacturing centre in the UCM. It is a tough place to live, with 1.4G gravity, a 32 hour day and a maximum 60ºC diurnal temperature variation. However, its vast reserves of natural recourses support an unparalleled industrial base among the Colonies, approaching that of some of the Cradle Worlds in their pre-war prime, although being far harsher on its billions of inhabitants. The UCMA's only supplier of battle tanks, Ferrous Motors, is also based on Ferrum, making it a linchpin of the Colonial military machine.

On October 21st, 2671 a massive Scourge invasion force leapt out of foldspace at the planet's outer marker, with no warning or prior suggestions that such a thing was even possible. The High Council and its military advisors had felt that the UCM's node code protection and anti-infiltration protocols were watertight – an assumption that was instantly and shamefully disavowed by this startling turn of events. How the enemy was able to either access the UCM's nodes or plant their own remains unconfirmed – a troubling fact to add to the ONI's growing list of unknowns to grapple with in this rapidly developing war.

The planet's shocked and unprepared defenders had a meagre nine hours to hastily prepare themselves for the onslaught. However, unlike when the Scourge attacked during their original invasions of the Cradle Worlds, mankind was fully aware of its enemy and well versed in fighting it. In addition, Ferrum was far from being an enlightened peacetime utopia as it was one of the UCM's most militarised planets in time of war. The enemy would have to pay dearly in blood for their assault even with total surprise on their side.

Battle in the void was joined less than 30 minutes after the first Scourge fleet contacts lit up the boards of Ferrum's outer marker patrols. Although fearfully outnumbered and caught off battle stations, these few ships and brave crews acquitted themselves with honour, selling their lives dearly in high velocity full void combat. The real test would come once the enemy reached Ferrum and had to slow to orbital combat speed, thus making it possible for the bulk of Battlefleet Ferrum to engage practically.

The initial full scale orbital battle over the beleaguered Colony was as bloody as it was short. Despite valiant action by its defenders, Ferrum's Battlefleet was almost entirely wiped out by the vastly superior Scourge force. Over 40 UCMF capital ships were destroyed in less than six hours of frantic combat, although their captains made the enemy pay for every loss, taking almost 50% above their number of Scourge vessels with them to the grave. This gave the enemy a window of opportunity to begin landings and open bombardment against the surface.

While ground-based defence batteries took a bloody and considerable toll on the oncoming contacts, reinforcements were hastily being assembled around the other Colonies. Each sent ships to bolster the defence, although Nicollum contributed the lion's share – not least, nine brand new Johannesburg class battlecruisers fresh from its orbital slips. Several of these ships were so new as to be technically unfinished and all were under-crewed, but were deemed able to enter the fray. Concerns such as furnishing took a distant second place to getting these fast ships to battle.

The actions of this rapid reaction force were crucial in saving Ferrum from being fatally overrun. The faster ships of the force (including the battlecruisers) were able to reach Ferrum's orbit in a record seven hours from arriving at the outer marker, a feat that would necessitate multiple engine refits later. Once in the battlespace, their efforts succeeded in breaking up the initial Scourge landings, destroying several enemy troopships of the second wave before they could complete their combat drops. However, an estimated four million Scourge troops had successfully made planetfall in this first 24 hours, with heavy armoured support in place.

While waves of UCM reinforcements arrived as and when possible, the titanic battle for the surface began to unfold. Multiple cities and industrial sectors were under assault and being pulverised by heavy ground and orbital fire. Once the first nukes began to detonate, it became clear that the enemy were not here for conquest, they were here for slaughter, destruction and retribution.

This was the first large scale aggressive use of nuclear weapons by the enemy and marked a distinct departure from their usual approach of preserve and conquer. Whether this heralded a new desperation after the Reconquest had taken its toll, a sheer unleashing of pent up hate or simply usual tactics against a planet they did not wish to take, this was different from all previous experience of the enemy.

Most warheads were the tactical variety planted by ground forces during their assaults. Indeed, this was the only viable delivery method for nukes against a planet with such a comprehensive missile halo as Ferrum. This saved the planet from being devastated by the far more destructive strategic variety of warhead from an orbital position. However, thousands of innocent civilians and valiant defenders alike were incinerated by the blasts, and many areas were irradiated to a level from which it will take centuries to recover. Within 24 hours of the first detonations, UCM ground forces had adjusted for such unprecedented actions and deployed radiological detectors to the frontline, making it much harder for the enemy to successfully bring in ground based tactical nukes in the future.

Once the shock of the attack and the nuclear strikes had diminished, the realities and necessities of the planet's defence emerged. Positions in and around the northern cities of New Manila and Hansburg were declared untenable and abandoned with needful haste, preserving their poorly positioned defenders to fight elsewhere. Redoubts were formed around the capital of New Paris and the industrial heartlands of the southern mountains. Fighting was particularly fierce around the city-sized Ferrous Motors tank factory known as the Iron Foundry, where defenders fought with bitter and zealous tenacity. Throughout the entire war on Ferrum, this mighty workshop churned out thousands upon thousands of battle tanks while under direct enemy assault, many rolling straight off the production line and into battle unpainted.

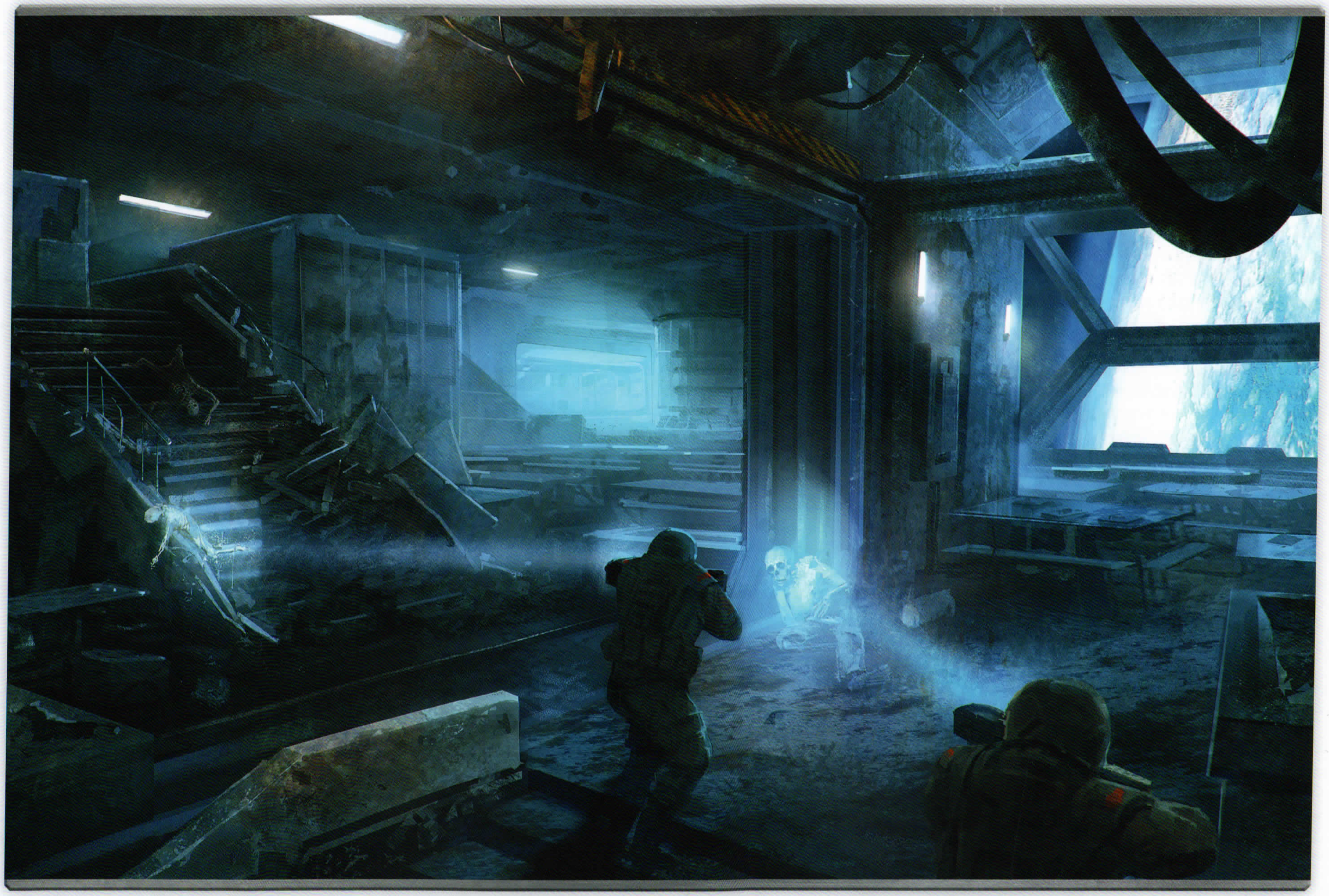
The void war above Ferrum's skies slowly began to turn in favour of the UCM from the third week of the onslaught onwards. Now marshalled and prepared, the UCMF sent wave after wave or reinforcements from anywhere it could spare them, especially after President Bellaque's 'backs to the wall' declaration that the planet could not and would not fall. In the eyes of the UCM's citizenry, this battle came to symbolise Colonial will and certainty. The planet's loss would represent a turning of the war against the UCM that the High Council could not countenance.

As both sides threw more forces into the fray, military casualties mounted to a level only exceeded by the costly campaigns in the Eden and Olympus systems. By the second month, the Scourge appetite to send further troops to bolster its forces on Ferrum dried up as their losses began to outstrip their gains. It seemed that the enemy had made its point and inflicted sufficiently punitive damage as to destroy forever any sense of certainty in their own safety that the UCM's citizens may have had before the invasion. However, shortly after the curtailment of Scourge reinforcement waves on Ferrum diminished, a new front was opened on the Colony of Aluminia, indicating a shift in what was clearly now an ongoing Scourge counter-offensive.

While the UCMF had painfully regained control of the wreckage-strewn voidspace of Ferrum by early January 2672, the ground war continued to rage on. Scourge ground forces seemed prepared to sell their lives to the last man while inflicting as much damage on the planet's infrastructure and populous as possible. This was a campaign of unbridled savagery, with only extermination and scorched earth as its goal.

With the enemy's nuclear capabilities neutralised, the Scourge were using entirely conventional weaponry to achieve this task, slowly eating away at the planet's cities and people in a manner never before seen in a Scourge attack. Almost no prisoners had been taken for assimilation – most captives were simply executed on the spot, their bodies dumped by Intruder dropships on the planet's defenders to sap their morale and spread pestilence as in medieval sieges of ancient Earth. Sadly and tragically, Ferrum's civilian population were least able to resist such brutality and suffered appalling casualties dwarfing those of the military during the entire Reconquest. In total, almost a billion human beings have lost their lives to the Scourge on this charnel house of a planet, with thousands more deaths occurring every day the enemy is at large to continue their campaign of genocide.

Today, final victory on the planet seems assured, although it is doubtless many weeks away. The bloody and hateful attrition that has come to characterise Ferrum's ground war is far from over, although its hard pressed defenders are at last beginning to glimpse the possibility of victory. Scourge ships are still present and fighting in the system however and there is no telling whether further reinforcements will arrive to blight this hellish warzone still further.



ALUMINIA SYSTEM

JANUARY 27TH, 2672, HOME FRONT - 59 DAYS SINCE ENEMY INCURSION

The planet Aluminia is an ocean world covered almost entirely by undulating azure seas. Entirely devoid of life when first discovered, mankind seeded this world with select marine life to create the ideal ecosystem for edible sealife. With almost all its townships devoted to fishing, this planet was best described as an Earth-sized fish farm. So successful was this venture, almost 60% of the protein consumed in the UCM originated from its teeming waters.

On November 29th, 2672, Aluminia became the second victim of the Scourge revenge counter-offensive that had previously been confined to the Ferrum system. In this case, a smaller force was sent to attack this bountiful world. Unlike on Ferrum, this force was almost exclusively naval, with only minimal ground forces in attendance.

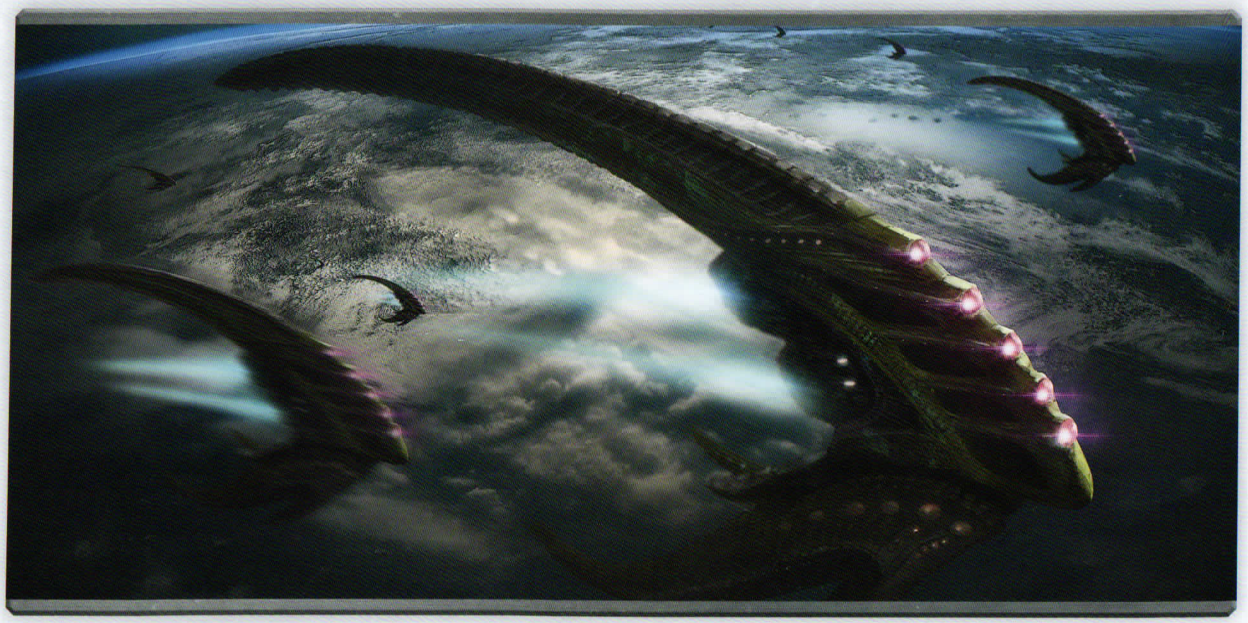
The fact of their arrival brought further doubt and uneasiness to the UCM's highest echelons, as the possibility that Ferrum's node placement was a one-off fluke could now be dismissed. However, Aurum and Nicollum were the obvious targets for the enemy if they had full access, which they plainly did not as these crucial worlds remained entirely unassailed.

Current speculation suggests that Scourge seed ships had discovered the targeted Colonies over the century or so since they had begun being sent randomly into the cosmos, but for some reason the enemy had not attacked until now. This second point is troubling as it goes against everything the Scourge character would suggest. A darker theory is that seed ships were diverted by the Shaltari in order to bring balance to the conflict, creating an equilibrium of slaughter on both sides in the wake of the UCM's successes in the Reconquest. Even when probably gifted the locations of some of the UCM's Colonies, the Scourge would doubtless have attacked without hesitation.

This would certainly conform to the Shaltari's alleged motive of orchestrating the war to eventually bring an end to humanity and the Scourge, although this accusation was made by the Scourge themselves and so can never be fully trusted.

Whatever the cause, as the Scourge threat approached the planet, its small compliment of void-based defenders stood and died in brave but ultimately hopeless opposition. Aluminia, while being an important world in the Colonies was lightly defended and not greatly militarised, given its predominant function of fish farming.

Once they had attained orbit, the Scourge began limited landing operations, supported by intense orbital bombardment to shield their small deployment of surface forces.



However, once they began conducting their missions, the true horror of the enemy's plans for Aluminia became clear. Groups of Scourge bulk landers were observed dumping noxious torrents of poisonous waste and lethal marine pathogens into the planet's pristine waters. Within hours, millions of tons of dead and spoilt sealife began forming colossal rafts of floating, bloated, foetid meat on the ocean's surface. The putrefaction spread like an unstoppable miasma from the infection sites, causing an eventual planet-wide loss of biomass unequalled in known history.

Hours after their arrival in system, UCMF relief forces began to arrive, knowing by now that the damage was done. This force, under the cool leadership of High Admiral Selene Saccarro, formed a cordon in high orbit, trapping the Scourge invasion force while not engaging directly. Their mission complete and damage done, the withdrawing Scourge ships would have to run a well prepared blockade from a lower orbital layer into the teeth of the relief force. The Scourge retreat proved catastrophic for the enemy, with almost 90% of their ships destroyed whilst fleeing for the outer marker. This was a small comfort to the UCM though as the entire planet's oceans had been spitefully poisoned to an extent that they might never recover.

Today, it is estimated that almost 90% of Aluminia's once abundant fish stocks are dead, the remaining 10% unfit for human consumption. This has denied the UCM one of its staple sources of protein and will no doubt cause deprivation and hunger across the Colonies. After the massive human cost of the battle of Ferrum was felt in the UCM's citizens' hearts, this loss was felt in their stomachs, bringing the realities of total war home to ordinary people. However, hope remains that the planet may one day recover, and efforts are currently underway to clear the waters of Aluminia of pollutants and pathogens, ready to receive new stocks of fish to one day feed millions of hungry mouths once more.

Wing Commander Jack Gibson hurled his Voidblade fighter into a sharp left turn, nearly blacking out in the process. "Y'all OK back there?" he asked breathlessly, with a mixture of faux concern and obvious glee, his thick Argentun accent obvious.

"Yes... sir" coughed Gomez his targeting operator, wiping fresh vomit from his slack mouth. "Please don't do that again... oh god... it's coming up agai..."

Sounds of specialist Gomez's breakfast hitting the floor punctuated the muted roar of engines as Wing Commander Gibson shrieked his defiance at the flight of Scourge interceptors he'd left in his wake. Even now, he trusted, his wingman was busy tearing the jellyheads to pieces from behind.

"Blue squadron, y'all still here?" A chorus of 'Sirs' followed this request, affirming that the flight was still intact. "Awesome. Enemy bombers 45 seconds an' closin'. Form up on my six, spool up rotary cannons, charge railguns. I want everythin' you've got emptied in 30 seconds 'a fury, ya got that?"

"SIR YES SIR!" roared the pilots of blue squadron. All levity subsided as the professionals these decorated flyboys were came to the fore. Pilot's hands adjusted their grips on steering columns, gunner's fingers on firing controls, engineer's palms pressed together, praying their services wouldn't be needed. All gritted their teeth as the enemy closed at fighting speed.

"Hold... Hold... Loose! Fire at will! Fire at will!" Scourge bombers zipped past Gibson's Voidblade like a hail of mansion-sized bullets, defence fire raking his squadron as they tore into the enemy. *First pass, three kills, no losses. Five seconds in... Roll, cut engines!*

Gibson rolled his Voidblade 180° along its centre-line, the fighter now drifting backwards at diving speed. His gunner, Stan Kettle (what a name) let loose a sustained torrent of fire as they travelled away from the bombers, taking two more down with skilful precision. MAYBE Gibson would lay off the abuse later in the rec-room if they made it through this... MAYBE. *Nine seconds in.*

"Full stop in' three... two... one... mark!" The Voidblade's thrusters fired for two sustained seconds, crushing its crew into their seats. Gomez had blacked out by now, slumped and drooling. *No worries, too close for targeting guys anyway.* Momentarily stationary, the Voidblade hung in space for a heartbeat, then Gibson slammed forward full throttle, reacquainting himself and his crew with extreme g-force. *Fifteen seconds in.*

Closing once more at ever increasing speed, Kettle squeezed the firing controls like he wanted to turn them to powder, unleashing an unending and vicious stream of tungsten coated depleted uranium laced death at the enemy, ending three more bombers in as many seconds. Five more seconds of increasingly inaccurate fire followed with no result, and Gibson jinked with the slightest adjustment in thrust, missing a Scourge bomber by a few wingspans at blinding speed. They were through the formation again, *twenty-five seconds in.*

"I'm out!" roared Kettle, "guns dry." Within five seconds, the rest of the squadron formed up around Gibson's fighter, now two craft short.

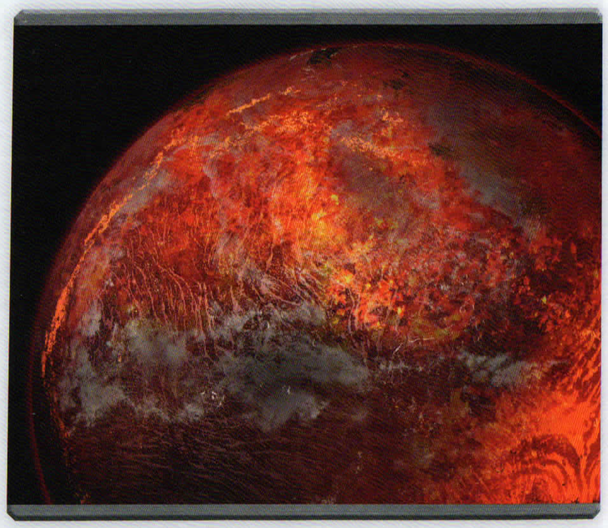
"Who bought it?" he asked laconically.

"Blue's three and eight, second pass, sorry man" reported Gomez, rising from his brief blackout.

"We'll morn 'em over whiskeys in the rec later. Time to head back to the *Midway*, we've earned scalps enough today."

WOLFRUM SYSTEM

JANUARY 27TH, 2672, HOME FRONT - 2 DAYS SINCE ENEMY INCURSION



The planet Wolfrum is a harsh, volcanic world known by its supremely hardy folk as 'Hell's Oven'. Its churning geological activity makes it both rich in mineral resources and an extremely hazardous place to live. Rivers of molten metal, surface deposits of rare minerals and chemical lakes make prospecting here a lucrative but dangerous trade. The planet's harshness and risky but rewarding returns have made it the pre-eminent penal world in the UCM. Convicts who volunteer for dangerous work are rewarded with shortened sentences and opportunity for those that prove the toughest to join the military rather than serve out their terms on Wolfrum. Such a harsh and brutal recruiting ground has produced more soldiers of the elite Praetorian Corps than any other world in the UCM.

The Scourge attack on Wolfrum came on January 25th, 2672, as suddenly as those on Ferrum and Aluminia. The planet's low place in the Colonial hierarchy ensured that the aggressors faced almost no opposition on approach. Despite its role as a recruiting ground, Wolfrum has always been viewed as an inconsequential backwater by Aurum's leadership, a fact that resulted in several uprisings in the past.

Within seven hours of arriving in system, the first Scourge strike carriers were beginning to break Wolfrum's sulphurous atmosphere. Soon, it was clear that the enemy's designs for their campaign here would be the same as on Ferrum – to murder, maim and decimate the population. However, unlike on Ferrum, almost every single one of the planet's inhabitants are hardened killers, psychopaths or individuals accustomed to harshness and violence at the very least. Early battles for access to the sealed penal colonies were savage, illustrating that the Scourge would be faced with a very different Colonial populous than they had become accustomed to slaughtering.

A UCMF relief taskforce is currently en-route to the system and it is understood that Wolfrum's small garrison fleet is entirely lost. They have been prepped for a harsh and brutal fight. With collateral damage far less of a problem than it was on Ferrum, this force is authorised to fire at will, treating damage from falling debris as necessary collateral not of primary concern.

With their coldly aloof rescuers en-route, the beleaguered convicts of Wolfrum are preparing to give the Scourge the fight of their lives and make them pay for every inch of bloody, ashen ground won in a bid to regain their place and worth in the UCM.

"All hands, this is the captain speaking. Battle stations, battle stations. This is not a drill. I repeat this is not a drill."

"Goddammit..." muttered Gunnery Lieutenant First Class Jim Hendricks, banging his head on the post of his cramped bunk while falling, ungracefully, out of bed. Pulling himself to his feet and rubbing sleep from his eyes, he fumbled for his glasses. Ramming the old fashioned frames onto his weary face and tugging his boots on, Hendricks stumbled half-dazed from his tiny berth, mental faculties returning with regrettable sluggishness. Good job he'd been sleeping in uniform, as they all had this week.

"Third damn call to general quarters in the middle of the blasted night in a row... this one better be worth it!" Hendricks scowled to himself, no one really listening as they shuffled in equal daze around him, each to their own posts. Fortunately, his was only a hundred meters or so from the berth and he'd make it to his station on time.

Suddenly, an ominous rumble passed through the superstructure around him, and he was instantly awake and icily sober as adrenaline coursed through him. One without training might not have thought much of it, but he appreciated that millions of tons of starship had just been shaken to the core - something which would require massive energies to achieve. *Shipfire for sure. No warning at all this time really. Get to his station. Fast.*

As he ran on steady feet towards the Berlin class cruiser UCMS Aurora's primary Cobra laser control station, Hendrick's brain was rapidly spilling into overdrive. *They'd better be charging the damn thing already... Chief Simmons had better have fixed that coolant leak on deck twelve... Caught on nightshift AGAIN... Hope we're not too late...*

As he careened into the station, he barked "Report!" at his zombie-like gunnery crew, eyes ablaze with something like excitement. Kicked into action by his arrival, various officers and enlisted reeled off a series of status indicators at speed, overlapping in their haste to get the words out. They knew he'd be taking it all in, absorbing the verbal confusion and visual indicators with practiced ease. *To think I was asleep less than two minutes ago...*

Without warning, another juddering vibration passed through the deck, draining what little colour remained on all their faces. Picking up his direct line to CIC, Hendricks asked, "XO, what have we got?"

"Shaltari raiding party, three frigates, Topaz class. Taken down four of our convoy and given us a few parting gifts on their way out. Nothing major Jim, two power substation fires, had to vent three compartments. I've given priority to weapons, then drive. Captain's turned us about on idle power to face their sterns. We'll get a few shots before they're out of range. No chance of catching them. Make 'em count! Fire at will Lieutenant."

"You heard the XO!" barked Hendricks, "Enemy to the fore, passing away. I see we're still well within effective range, weapon charged at 90%. Prepare to fire in ten seconds." As his crew hastily fumbled with the controls and their rapidly regaining consciousness, Hendricks prowled the small chamber that was the brain of one of the mightiest weapons mounted to a UCM cruiser, a mammoth laser longer than some foldspace capable starships. He took his seat in the targeting dais, fingers wrapping with familiar and grim pleasure around the firing column.

"Give me visual, I'm doing this by eye. I want to see them burn." As soon as he made the request, an on screen visual appeared overlaid on his targeting HUD, giving him a clear sight of the nearest enemy frigate. Its outline was clear and energy signature low - *shields down then... They're trying to get out of acquisition range rather than take any hits. Shame for them they're not nearly far enough away for that...*

Making a few delicate adjustments, he said, calmly, "Firing." Squeezing the trigger, his index finger unleashed the weapon's colossal pent up energy in a searing beam of fiery incandescence, momentarily whitening the visual feed before the brightness adjusted. Keeping his finger on the trigger, he could see the devastating beam cutting deep into the fleeing target which began venting eldritch and unknowable energies to the void. Around him, a pervasive hum was the only sign that much of the entire ship's power output was being unleashed just ahead of them.

After three seconds of sustained burn, Hendrick's chief engineer Mr Simmons stuttered tremulously "Down to 40% yield sir... heat b-buildup... getting c-critical."

"I know, I know!" snarled Hendricks through gritted teeth, eyes intent and focused on his kill. One second later, the target separated into two molten halves and the room erupted into cheers. A smile of grim satisfaction on his face, Hendricks muttered, "One kill only. The Spinys got four of ours. I'm far from done yet. Give me the next one Franklin."

As his chief targeting officer brought the next ship into view, a change was obvious. A slightly blurred shimmering effect seemed to ripple over the target. *Shields up then... they know they can't run from the next shot. They'll drop 'em and be out of range if they survive this one. Better make sure one of them doesn't...*

"Mr Simmons, power?"

"At 70% yield Sir. Could do with some time for heat dissipation Sir... remember how you blew the primary coolant tubes last time?"

"I don't need reminding and frankly I don't care. We're here to kill, Mr Simmons, not to keep our weapons clean. Firing."

As Hendricks squeezed the trigger once more, a searing stream of energy struck the ship on screen, splashing outwards from the target like a waterfall in a plunge pool. *Hold... hold... Keep it up... Those shields will buckle soon enough...*

"S-sir... yield down to 30% Sir. Coolant warning amber. Enemy shields holding... Maybe best let this one go?.. Sir?"

"Not a damn chance," vowed Hendricks with steely resolve, keeping that steady hand squeezing the trigger, utterly focused on the kill.

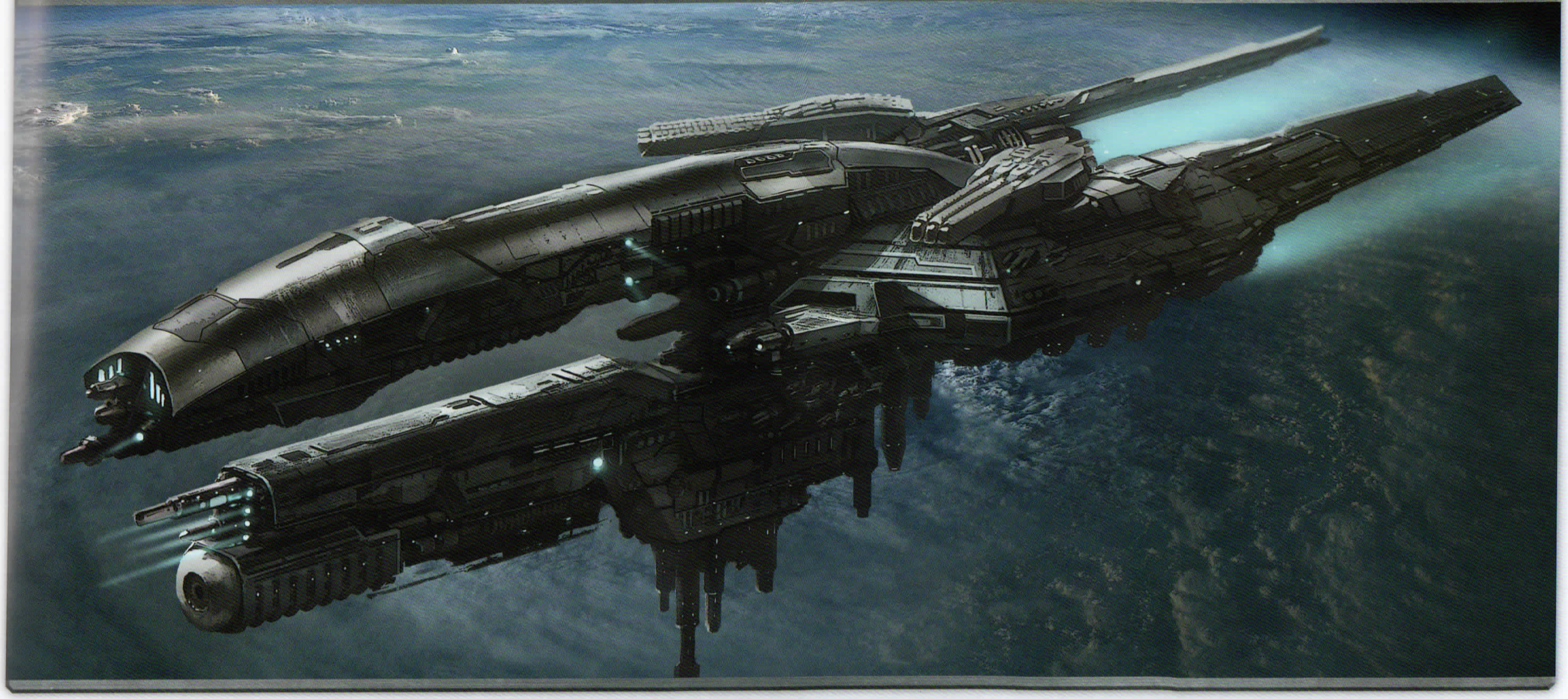
"10% now... Red warning! Tertiary cooling pipes showing danger markers! Sir, you've got to let go!"

Suddenly, the frigate's shields ruptured like a soap bubble and the Cobra's searing energy began to cut into the hull. "Yes!.. Just a few more seconds... Ha! Heart shot!" As Hendricks barked in evident triumph, the enemy vessel's core erupted in icy blue fire, taking the whole ship with it.

The moment he let go of the trigger, the lights in the room went out for a second before reigniting. "What the hell was that?"

"Power surge," sighed Simmons. "We've lost deck twelve's coolant exchanger... Again. Sir."

"Ahh well, can't be helped. The last one's lowering shields now, signature dropping. Would've been too far to get a lock now anyway. I'm off back to bed, need my beauty sleep you know." As he winked at his furious chief engineer, Hendricks strolled nonchalantly from the room, effortlessly dodging the empty cup of coffee sailing past his grinning face.



Corporal Kyle Shern of the Aurum IV'th Legion opened his eyes, seeing nothing but blinding whiteness. As his pupils slowly adjusted and eyelids flickered, he began to make out his surroundings. Several blurry figures swirled nearby, coming into focus with leaden slowness. Desperately, he fumbled the ground... no... the sideboard... for a weapon. *The bastards were on him he knew... god... there must be something he could use...*

Before he could move further, an unexpectedly calm but sternly authoritative voice said, "Lie back down now Corporal. Easy. Don't panic, you're safe." As the soldier, now as he realised, a patient, relaxed a little, the voice continued, "You're fine really, quite miraculous. Just a nasty head wound and a fractured leg, you've been unconscious for over a week."

"My squad?" choked Kyle, in a voice as dry as a tomb,

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but you're the only one alive I'm afraid. They tell me your comrades were all killed. Mostly... very quickly, I understand. The building you were in was compromised, crawling with those horrid... worm things... Anyway, a Praetorian team found you still breathing hours later. At that point you were lifted from the surface to here. You're aboard the battleship *Carpe Noctum*, med-bay 12. Free beds have been scarce after the attack, so brass has been distributing wounded anywhere they can. You're lucky, really, you are. This old warhorse has been through hell and back more times than any other ship in the Reconquest I'll be bound, and she's still here. Nothing's going to sink this bitch, mark my words."

Odd, thought Kyle, such an affected accent as he was used to from his 'betters' back on Aurum, but with a good chunk of 'military' language thrown in. Still, he'd heard of *Carpe Noctum*, a legendary ship by all accounts. First to break the Scourge cordon on Eden's D-Day, first to score a battleship kill in the Reconquest (on the same day no less) and one of the most decorated vessels on active duty. He'd never been on such a large ship before, let alone one so illustrious. Burying his feelings for the rest of his squad in the way only a veteran soldier can, he asked the only real question on his mind, "Can I look around?"

Two days later, after he was cleared to leave med-bay 12, which he'd come to regard as his jail, Kyle walked unsteadily through the access hatch into one of *Carpe Noctum's* countless unending corridors. It was surprisingly cramped, dark and unglamorous for a primary concourse of such a massive ship. Catching his frown, his guide, Lieutenant Gloria Yorke, remarked, "Damage prevention design. Each corridor kinks every 20 meters or so, limits explosion and shrapnel damage. Every 50 meters there's a blast door. You'll notice how crew rush across those open thresholds? Silly naval superstition really... They're designed to seal the section in milliseconds, preventing decompression in the event of a hull breach. Each door weighs eight tons I'm told. I guess if one DID close on you, you'd end up as jelly... hmm..."

Strange woman indeed... very... medical. Still, he liked her, despite being a virtual prisoner in a place which he found massively interesting but previously closed to him. As they rounded the next corner however, his jaw dropped. Ahead was a glass viewing gallery overlooking a cavernous and gloomy space. As he drew closer like a kid at the zoo, he saw ant-like figures in orange jumpsuits moving around far below as titanic gantries moved enormous aircraft into loading bays above.

"Voidhammers," stated the healer brusquely, "tactical heavy bombers. Designed for anti-shipping operations. Before you is hangar three. This ship has twelve in total."

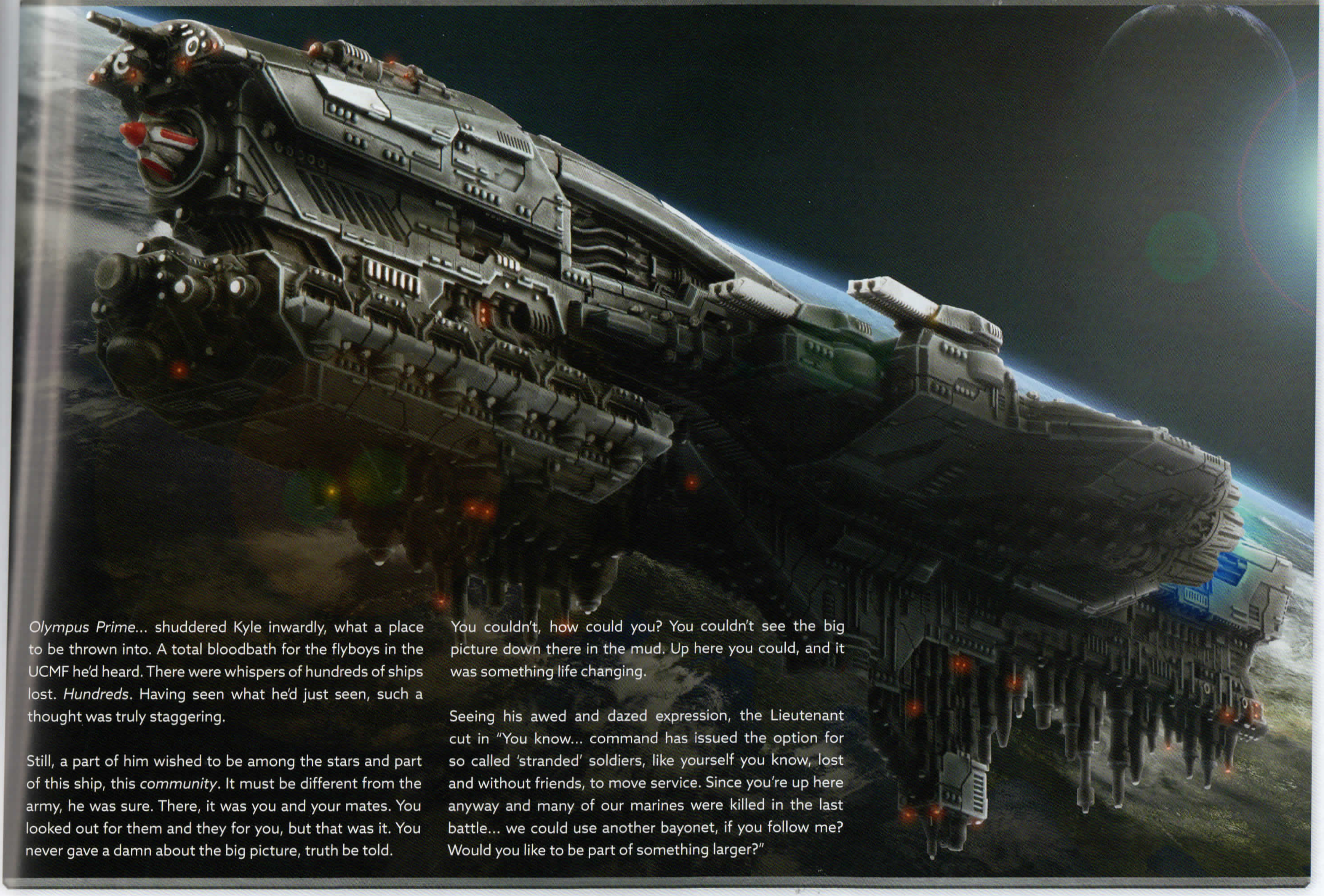
"Twelve!?" remarked Kyle, "That's just..." As he was trying to bend his mind round the idea of a ship as large as the *Noctum*, Yorke pulled him onwards.

"This is just an orientation tour. You'll be free to wander at your leisure later on, but my time is limited. This way please, mind the threshold!" she trilled, jumping over the nearly invisible gap between two compartments, winking conspiratorially, proving she was human. Smiling despite his awe at the hangar, he followed her, matching her overblown dash to the next section, wincing inwardly. *Leg still not entirely set then...*

Most of the vessel's interior was far less interesting to Kyle than the hangars and largely without the grandeur he'd expected from a mighty battleship. The mess hall was larger than any he'd seen outside a troopship (one of seven, he'd been told) and the unobstructed view of one of *Carpe Noctum's* many power cores had been instructive, but he yearned for a true sense of the vastness of this place. As they stepped from what seemed the thousandth lift into the thousandth non-descript corridor, Kyle caught the change in the light. Something was different up ahead, the light was more... *natural*.

Rounding the last corner, Corporal Kyle Shern saw a sight he would never forget. It burned itself onto his retina with its sheer majesty. There and then, he swore that if he ever got home, this scene would be the first he'd commit to canvas. Laid out above him through an expansive viewing window, stretching endlessly into the void was the keel of the mighty ship. Vastly and unknowably complex, this leviathan's belly was possibly the most impressive thing he'd ever witnessed, until he looked down.

Below him was the majesty of the Cradle World Elysium Prime, its beautiful, verdant form turning beneath them in stately majesty. Hard to imagine the horrors he'd been through unfolding down there... such a beautiful place. Between himself and the surface was a breathtaking array of UCMF vessels, many mighty capital ships. Another New York class battleship loomed in the distance, dwarfed by the immensity of the world below. "That's the *Liberty Queen*, joining us from Battlefleet Eden apparently. Now that this world is ours we'll be making for the outer marker and Olympus Prime to reinforce the fleet there in three days," explained Lieutenant Yorke.



Olympus Prime... shuddered Kyle inwardly, what a place to be thrown into. A total bloodbath for the flyboys in the UCMF he'd heard. There were whispers of hundreds of ships lost. *Hundreds*. Having seen what he'd just seen, such a thought was truly staggering.

Still, a part of him wished to be among the stars and part of this ship, this *community*. It must be different from the army, he was sure. There, it was you and your mates. You looked out for them and they for you, but that was it. You never gave a damn about the big picture, truth be told.

You couldn't, how could you? You couldn't see the big picture down there in the mud. Up here you could, and it was something life changing.

Seeing his awed and dazed expression, the Lieutenant cut in "You know... command has issued the option for so called 'stranded' soldiers, like yourself you know, lost and without friends, to move service. Since you're up here anyway and many of our marines were killed in the last battle... we could use another bayonet, if you follow me? Would you like to be part of something larger?"

LSA-416
UCMS AVENGER

NEW ORLEANS CLASS STRIKE CARRIER

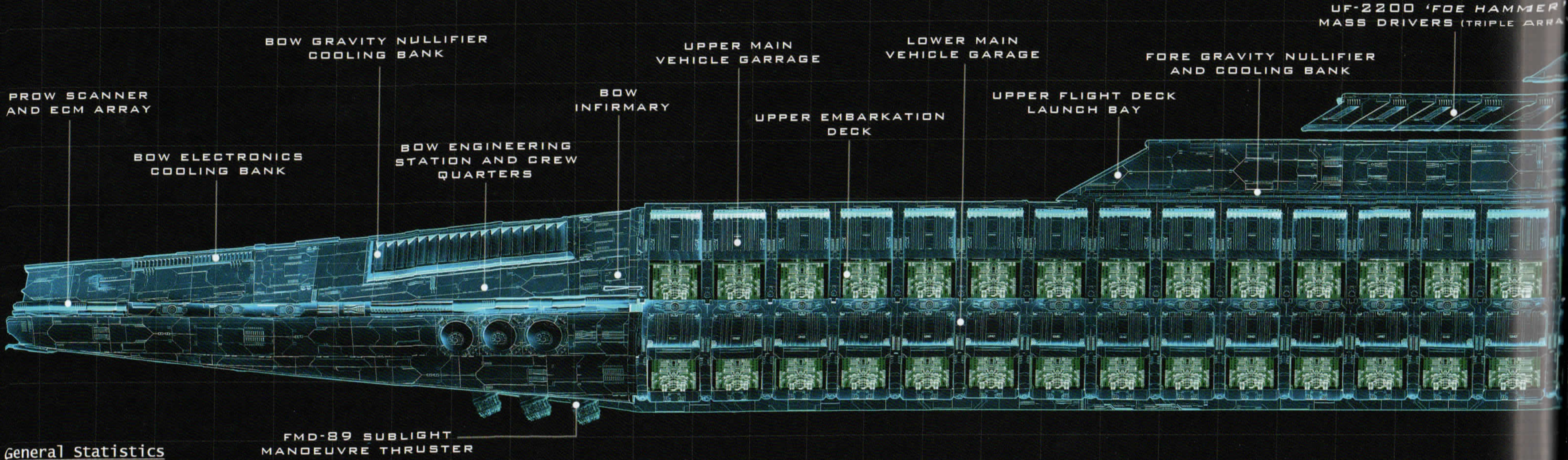
NICCOLUM SHIPYARDS, AD2664

The New Orleans Class Strike Carrier is a first wave planetary assault vessel designed to deliver ground troops to combat zones. The class is a mainstay of almost all UCM fleets and is one of the most common vessels of frigate tonnage to see service in the Reconquest, with almost a thousand operational by 2671 .

A New Orleans' formidable payload of armoured units and infantry are deployed by agile dropships, making it ideally suite fluid, early- stage combat operations where heavy enemy action is anticipated. It is one of the largest vessels the UCM ha that is capable of atmospheric operations - an essential feature, as most UCM dropships cannot operate in the void and mus be dropped relatively close to the surface.

The New Orleans is a relatively new class as its specifications were laid down late in the development of the UCM military machine to allow for the designs for its cargo to fully mature. The *Avenger* is the 416th vessel of her class to be commissioned and she has seen considerable action since the start of the Reconquest. She has the honour of being the very first UCM vessel to break atmosphere on D-Day over Eden Prime and was at the forefront of that campaign during its openin months.

Early in 2671 she was transferred to the Olympus theatre to assist in daring landing operations on the atmospheric envelop of the vast orbital platforms above Olympus Prime. She sustained heavy damage during the assault on Installation 409 and h since returned to the Niccolum docks for extensive repairs and a general upgrade refit. She is projected to return to serv imminently where she will no doubt add to her already impressive service record.


UF-2200 'FOE HAMMER'
MASS DRIVERS (TRIPLE ARRA
BOW GRAVITY NULLIFIER COOLING BANK
UPPER MAIN VEHICLE GARRAGE
LOWER MAIN VEHICLE GARAGE
FORE GRAVITY NULLIFIER AND COOLING BANK
PROW SCANNER AND ECM ARRAY
BOW INFIRMARY
UPPER FLIGHT DECK LAUNCH BAY
UPPER EMBARKATION DECK
BOW ELECTRONICS COOLING BANK
BOW ENGINEERING STATION AND CREW QUARTERS
FMD-89 SUBLIGHT MANOEUVRE THRUSTER

General Statistics

Length: 564m

Beam: 161m

Propulsion (Primary): 5x Niccolum Drive Yards XJ390 *Faraday* sublight engines (class C)

Propulsion (Secondary): 8x Niccolum Drive Yards XJ110 *Kepler* sublight engines (class F)

Propulsion (Tertiary): 26x Ferrous Motors FMD-89 sublight manoeuvre thrusters (class H)

FTL Facility: 1x Tokyo-Beijing Technologies *'Blue-3'* Foldspace Drive (displacement rating-3)

Atmospheric Lift Systems: 1x Aurum Quantum Works *'Ikarus-4'* Gravity Nullification Engine (rated continuous runtime 75 hours)

Powerplant: 2x Niccolum Fleet Industries *'Sunstar-F6'* Fusion Cores (yield rating-6 each)

Range: Unlimited. Safe FTL recharge in 14 hours, rated for 35 jumps before overhaul

Sensors, ECM and Comms: Standard Colonial Fleet Electronic Warfare Package, Frigate level (exact nature and composition classified)

Lifeboats: 49x Niccolum Fleet Industries *Shackelton* class Escape Pods (capacity 42 souls/boat)

Armour: Classified

Armament

Primary: 3x Chang-Steinbeck UF-2200 *'Foe Hammer'* class-3 Mass Drivers in single turret, 270° traverse

Close Attack: 4x Prow Munitions Tubes (12x Titanian Ordnance *Barracuda* Light D-class Void Torpedoes, payload as required)

Point Defence (Primary): 12x Ferrum Optical *Aegis-V* Laser weapons in independently traversable turrets (N-4 class)

Point Defence (Secondary): 90x Niccolum Drive Yards PD Lasers, hull mounted (Z-3 class)

Fleet Air Arm Complement

Attack: 6x *Seraphim* Strike Fighters (atmospheric)

Close Protection: 10x *Archangel* Interceptors (atmospheric)

UCMA Payload

as D-Day: Eden Prime, June 6th, 2670AD

AASC (Army Air and Space Corps) Aircraft:
100x *Condor* Medium Dropships
8x *Albatross* Heavy Dropships
12x *Raven-A* Light Dropships
18x *Raven-B* Light Dropships
6x *Falcon* Gunships

Colonial Armoured Corps Vehicles:
99x *Sabre* MBT's
60x *Rapier* AAT's
12x *Gladius* HBT's
8x *Scimitar* Tank Destroyers
9x *Katana* Light Tanks
9x *Fireblade* Light Tanks
64x *Bear* APC's
5x *Kodiak* ACV's
3x *Ferrum* class Drone Bases
1x *Chromia* class Orbital Relay Base
36x *Wolverine* LAV's

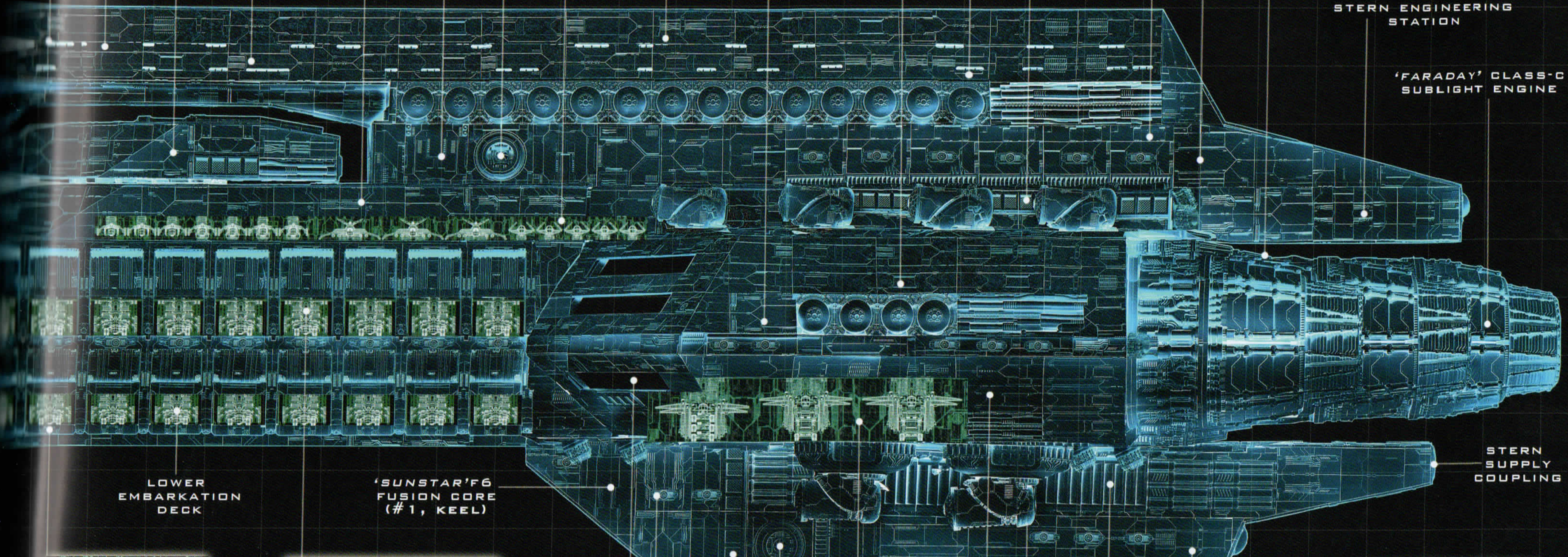
Personnel

as D-Day: Eden Prime, June 6th, 2670AD

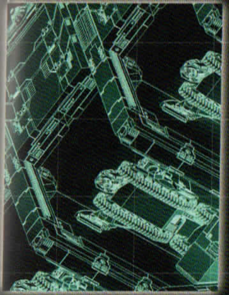
Permanent UCMF Crew:
27 Admiralty Staff
30 Colonial Marines (Ship Security Detail)
20 Fleet Air Arm Aircrew
123 Other Ship's Company (Engineer Services etc)

UCMA Assault Group EP216:
1000 Colonial Legionnaires (1 Full Cohort)
320 Colonial Armoured Corps Vehicle
152 AASC Aircrew
30 Praetorian Special Forces Operat
12 Technical Support Staff
9 AHQ Commanding Officers

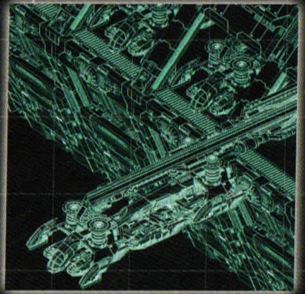
TOTAL: 1723 souls



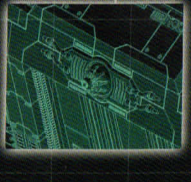
SHEET SCALE 1:950
10M
OBSERVATION DECK
UCMA MAIN MESS HALL
MASS DRIVER TURRET AND GUNNERY ENGINEER'S STATION
DORSAL INFIRMARY AND MEDICAL OFFICER'S QUARTERS
LIGHT VEHICLE GARRAGE
PRAETORIAN BARRACKS AND LIGHT CRAFT AIRCREW QUARTERS
UPPER HANGAR DECK
CENTRAL SUPPLY COUPLING
CIC (COMMAND INFORMATION CENTRE) AND SHIP'S BRIDGE (CENTRAL HULL)
COLONIAL LEGIONNAIRE BARACKS
OFFICER'S MESS AND QUARTERS (CENTRAL HULL)
UCMF CREW QUARTERS AND MESS HALL
#2 FUSION CORE COOLING BANK
'SUNSTAR' F6 FUSION CORE (#2, AFT)
AFT GRAVITY NULLIFIER
'KEPLER' CLASS-F SUBLIGHT ENGINE
STERN ENGINEERING STATION
'FARADAY' CLASS-C SUBLIGHT ENGINE
STERN SUPPLY COUPLING
LOWER EMBARKATION DECK
'SUNSTAR'F6 FUSION CORE (#1, KEEL)
ATMOSPHERIC O2 INTAKE
#1 FUSION CORE COOLING BANK
AFT SUPPLY COUPLING
PORT SIDE HEAVY DROPSHIP HANGAR
BLUE 3 FOLDSPACE DRIVE CORE (CENTRAL HULL)
FOLDSPACE DRIVE COOLING BANK
AFT ENGINEERING STATION



LOWER EMBARKATION DECK DEPLOYMENT TRAPDOOR
-LOWERS FOR GRAVITY DROP. HULL DOOR ALSO OPENS TO ALOW FORWARD DEPLOYMENT

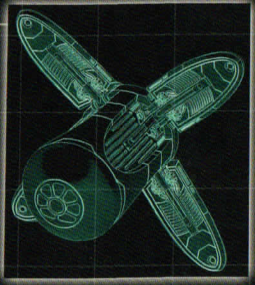


UPPER EMBARKATION DECK DROPSHIP DEPLOYMENT GANTRY
-EXTENDS FOR GRAVITY DROP AND FULL HULL CLEARANCE



HULL MOUNTED LIGHT POINT DEFENSE LASER, BALL TRAVERSE
(Z-3 CLASS)

AEGIS-V POINT DEFENSE LASER WEAPON ON TRAVERSABLE TURRET
(N-4 CLASS)



***SHALKELTON* CLASS ESCAPE POD**
(CAPACITY 42 SOUS)

THE UNITED COLONIES OF MANKIND

Forged in desperation, united by adversity and resurgent in power, the UCM exists for a single purpose – to wrest mankind's lost strongholds from the clutches of the Scourge. A collection of diverse and remote frontier worlds, the UCM is a restless cultural melting pot, bubbling with a righteous desire for vengeance.

One and a half centuries after the Scourge captured Earth and the Cradle Worlds, the UCM expanded beyond all recognition. Its militaristic society assembled the greatest army and fleet in the history of humanity and hurled it at its hated foe in an attempt to recapture its lost territories. This monumental endeavour is known as the Reconquest, a galaxy-wide conflagration of war and death which has been burning ceaselessly for 600 days. With hopes of a quick victory dashed, humanity must now dig deep and sustain this titanic effort to rid the universe of the Scourge, or perish in the attempt.

RECONQUEST

Central to the entire UCM, its strategies and its very soul is the Reconquest, a monumental and species-wide effort to re-conquer what was lost to humanity during the Scourge invasion of 2507. The key prizes in this effort are the verdant and bountiful Cradle Worlds and of course, Earth itself, the birthplace of mankind. This effort is virtually total, with the resources of the UCM almost entirely focused on the undertaking. Its success or failure will determine the future of the human race and the opportunity to attempt such an enterprise will not come again for hundreds of years, if at all.

In the 600 days since its inception, the Reconquest has claimed the lives of millions, and although gains have been made, it is far from on track. The campaign is beset by problems, setbacks and delays, exacerbated by the involvement of the Post Human Republic and the Shaltari, their machinations complicating the campaign in every theatre. However, the Cradle World of Eden Prime is now fully in Colonial hands and Elysium will surely follow in the coming days. There is certainly hope for the future despite the setbacks as free humans walk once more on worlds formerly under the yolk of the Scourge.

THE COLONIES

The UCM consists of a series of former frontier planets, once peopled only by desperadoes, ne'er do wells and enterprising characters, eager to forge new lives and seek fortunes. These worlds were not chosen for their beauty or amenity, but rather for their considerable mineral wealth.

The course of their development was irrevocably altered in the chaotic aftermath of the Scourge invasion, when scores of fleeing refugees descended on these obscure backwaters. A measure of the enterprising and hardy character of the original inhabitants influenced this massive influx of new blood, creating a new and dynamic civilisation.

Today, the colonies have become the industrial powerhouses they were originally intended to be, churning out the mighty war machine required to take on the Scourge. Their extensive natural resources have proven crucial to mankind's spectacular recovery from total defeat. The estimated population of the UCM has recently exceeded 20 billion souls, although the millions of deaths in the Reconquest are taking its toll.

All the UCM's planets are located far beyond the Western Spiral Arm of the Galaxy. While there are officially hundreds of worlds in the UCM, the majority are nothing more than barren rocks, with only tiny outposts and mining concerns. A relatively small number are of central importance in the UCM and house the vast majority of its people. The grandest of these are colloquially known as 'The Big Dozen'.

The most important of these is Aurum, current seat planet of the High Council and most populous of the Colonies. Cuprum, Titania and Ferrum are the largest industrial powerhouses, servicing, housing and building much of the UCM's mighty Legions and armoured brigades.

The planets of Maganum and Aluminia are the bread baskets of the Colonies and provide much of the food to satiate the hungers of mankind's billions. The orbital slips above the blue gas giant of Niccolum house and construct the UCMF's mighty warships and are home base of the Admiralty and the Office of Naval Intelligence.

Previously isolated from the war, the Colonies have recently come under attack from the Scourge in their first major counter-strike of the war. The factory world of Ferrum was the first to be hit just under 100 days ago in a surprise attack on October 21st, 2671. Second, the lightly defended ocean world of Aluminia was forever defiled by a Scourge fleet on November 29th, followed by bloody fighting on and around the penal world of Wolfrum from January 25th, 2672.

The choice of targets seemed to UCM strategists as opportunistic and less than ideal (Aurum and Niccolum remain unassailed), leading to the conclusion that these are the only worlds the Scourge can currently jump to accurately. How the Scourge were able to break security protocols and lay foldspace nodes at the targets remains a mystery that still haunts the High Council, although the weight of speculation lays the blame at the feet of the Shaltari.

Whatever the cause of this catastrophic lapse, it must be concluded that the Colonies are no longer safe and able to direct the war from an aloof distance. The carnage has been brought to them, and the home front must now be strengthened. High ranking officials in the UCMA and UCMF are currently protesting that this will stretch the armies and fleets on the Cradle worlds beyond the breaking point but are unable to offer up any alternative suggestions. War is brutal and unpredictable and the die is now cast – the future belongs to those who fight to the very limits of their being.

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

Broadly speaking, there are two levels of government in the UCM. Each planet has reasonable freedom to govern its own affairs, and often laws, practices and institutions vary slightly between colonies. This is deemed a sensible measure since each planet has quite different concerns, making blanket laws unsuitable. Each planet is controlled by an elected assembly, chaired by a Planetary Governor, chosen by that assembly.

The concerns of the UCM as a whole are directed by a central government, currently based in Aurum's capital, the recently renamed Aurum City (its original namesake on the Cradle Worlds, Atlantia, has come to symbolise disaster after its destruction by thermonuclear fire). The majority of this assembly consists of the UCM Senate. The number of seats held by each planet is determined by population, but every planet in the UCM has at least one seat. One of the roles of the various planetary governments is to elect these representatives. In the Senate, decisions which affect the UCM in its entirety are ratified and coordinated, which are predominantly diplomatic or military in nature. As such, the Senate plays a crucial role in directing the will of the UCM as a whole, and is largely responsible for coordinating the efforts of the colonies towards this purpose.

Major decisions, policies and directives are normally proposed by a senior institution – the UCM High Council. Each planet with a population of over 500 million people returns a representative to this body. During short, crucial sessions it is customary for the Planetary Governors themselves to take up this role. While serving, members gain the rank of High Councillor, in addition to their existing titles. Every eight years, the Council elects a President from among its ranks. He/She immediately relinquishes all existing positions, and concentrates solely on the weighty task of serving as first among equals on the Council. The current incumbent is President Helena Bellaque, a mighty and popular figure who has been serving before and throughout the Reconquest. Her inspiring and fiery leadership after the recent setbacks on the home front have been instrumental in maintaining morale and galvanising the public towards further struggle.

Due to the dire threats facing the UCM, military figures have a prominent presence in both the High Council and the Senate. These are chosen as representatives by their respective institutions. Supreme Admiral 'Granite' Halsey and Supreme Marshal Zachiev (heads of the UCMF and UCMA respectively) have permanent seats although they often send representatives, such is the weight of their military responsibilities. Also, noted industrialists and powerful businessmen hold honorary seats in the Senate, representing many concerns, and serving acrucial advisory role. The President's foremost confidant High Councillor Jonas Crowe is one such figure as CEO of CLAW (Cuprum Light Armour Works), although as a native of Wolfrum he sits for that planet on the Council.

To the average citizen, the actions of distant institutions such as the High Council, Senate and even their own planetary government may seem far removed from the struggles of daily existence. Directives made thousands of light-years distant are often deemed aloof, unsympathetic or even invasive. However, the ominous threat of the Scourge is a persuasive force for cohesion which has led to strong solidarity. This has been recently tested by the mass losses in the Reconquest as well as attacks on the home front and not yet been found wanting.

MILITARY STATE

Despite its democratic underpinnings, the UCM is essentially a military state. This has arisen not through tyranny, but through necessity. Many senior army and fleet offices come automatically with Senate and even High Council seats. Most civilian politicians recognise the need for defence issues to supersede all other concerns and are still firmly behind the Reconquest. The UCM has essentially been in a state of war since its very foundation.

Most UCM citizens live austere and often harsh lives, human toil being the lifeblood of the Reconquest. Most accept this with stoic determination, and hope one day to see the bountiful Cradle Worlds and even Earth itself with their own eyes. These distant jewels have a place in the heart of many who once listened in awe to their grandparents' tales of great cities, verdant gardens and lives of leisure. All understand that a free future can only be theirs through annihilating the Scourge.

Military service is seen as paramount for the survival of mankind, especially now that the Reconquest is underway. Today, over 4.5% of the population are mobilised - a higher percentage than at any other time in the history of humanity and a figure which has actually risen 0.5% since the outbreak of hostilities, despite massive casualties.

In total, the UCM has almost a billion men and women in uniform, although of course only a fraction of these are actually fighting individuals, as every armed force needs multitudes in support roles. Military service is currently volunteer only, although there is constitutional provision for conscription should the need arise. However, all jobs which help the war effort, even the most humble, are lauded as honourable and necessary for the good of the species. Despite this attitude, the High Council is seriously considering conscription at this time given recent events, although it is seen as a gross breach of human decency and is viewed as likely to turn public opinion against the military led status quo.

THE ARMY

The United Colonial Army (the UCMA) has greater manpower than the fleet, although it has fewer materiel resources. The bulk of the UCMA's fighting soldiers are concentrated in the mighty Colonial Legions. Each Legion numbers around a million fighting men and women plus their support staff and is generally raised from the same planet. More populous colonies raise many legions as indicated by roman numerals in their name (e.g. Maganum III'rd Legion). The Legions are supported by the Colonial Armoured Corps, also vast formations which include all ground vehicle crews and support staff. The CAC also includes the formidable Colonial Tank Battalions, some of the most potent fighting entities in the Reconquest.

The UCMA's ground troops are flown to their dropsites by the Army Air and Space Corps (AASC). This organisation includes all dropship and gunship crews and their support staff. The AASC works closely with the fleet, as they are the vital interface between the ground troops and ships in orbit.

The UCMA is commanded by Army Headquarters (AHQ), possibly the most influential military body in the UCM, although the Admiralty would beg to differ. AHQ also includes Army Intelligence as well as the Military Science Division, although the latter also works closely with the Admiralty.

Inter-service rivalry is mostly a source of light amusement rather than conflict, although occasionally friction does flare up. In recent times especially, accusations have been levelled by AHQ at the fleet due to perceived lack of support. Casualties are inevitably higher in the UCMA as the humble Legionnaires are in the thick of the bloodiest battles, leading to the greatest source of friction between the army and the fleet. However, the most senior individuals with access to a full and uncompromising picture of the Reconquest and its needs rarely make such comments and understand that death in the void can be just as visceral and more often total. Solidarity and sacrifice will be central to the success of the endeavour and millions more soldiers and sailors will likely have to meet their deaths if the dreaded foe is to be eradicated.

THE COLONIAL FLEET

The United Colonies of Mankind Fleet (UCMF) is the second largest UCM military body in manpower (after the UCMA) although it has the greatest share of materiel resources. The sheer volume of materials required to construct its many starships is truly awe inspiring and as a result shipbuilding is the single biggest drain on the UCM's resources. However, such an undertaking is essential to the Reconquest and it has been deemed that there is no such thing as 'too many ships' in this war, ensuring that humanity's shipyards are ceaseless in their toils.

Home port to the UCMF is the colony of Niccolum – a blue gas giant ringed by trillions of tons of mineral rich rock containing rare metals and materials central to shipbuilding. As such, most UCM vessels are built here using mainly local resources by the planet's orbital population – the largest number of humans ever to live out their entire lives in space. In 2672, Niccolum is encircled by thousands of orbital instillations, shipyards, repair docks and defence emplacements making it the obvious location for Fleet Command.

The fleet itself consists of many thousands of ships ranging from the smallest lighter to the largest dreadnought. Although the fleet isn't as large as it once was after the cataclysmic First Battles of Olympus and Ferrum, it is still a mighty force unequalled in the entire history of mankind. It currently comprises over 3500 fighting vessels of frigate tonnage, over 900 cruiser level ships, 86 battleships, 9 dreadnoughts and 5 supercarriers, not to mention the myriad of support craft and supply haulers necessary to keep such a vast operation afloat. This number is shifting on a daily basis as great ships meet their demise and new ones leave the orbital slips of Niccolum to face their destiny in the stars.

The fighting element of the UCMF is split into five parts:

The Admiralty: This body oversees the actions of the fleet, plans its operations and directs them in battle, frequently in person. All commissioned officers above the rank of Lieutenant are members and may attend conferences if able. Higher level meetings are of course reserved for the premier ranks. A proportion of the Admiralty is always in session on Niccolum, although the Supreme Admiral (currently Jacob 'Granite' Halsey) is often on Aurum as his rank befits him a place on the High Council itself. Due to the amount of decisive and destructive power it can unleash, it is often said that the Admiralty is the most powerful institution humanity has ever known.

The Colonial Battlefleets: The vast majority of the UCMF's manpower is part of the Battlefleets themselves. This includes all sailors of Lieutenant rank and below, fleet engineers and other support staff necessary aboard ship to keep them in fighting order. This is the second most populous body in the UCM behind the Colonial Legionnaire Corps.

Orbital Defence Command: The ODC is responsible for the maintenance and operation of all the UCMF's static defence instillations, armed dockyards and orbital outposts. It also fulfils the secondary role of wartime maintenance and servicing of the Battlefleets when in home ports. The ODC also works closely with the civilian contractors tasked with shipbuilding and it often has officers embedded in those companies to ensure quotas are met.

Fleet Air Arm: This body includes all strike craft related personnel and is split into three parts; Fighter Command, Strike Command and the Air Logistical Corps. These groups pilot and maintain the UCMF's fighters, bombers, shuttles and other ancillary craft. They are also the only part of the fleet to see much action on the ground battlefields of the Reconquest as they also encompass all fast atmospheric aircraft such as the Archangel interceptor and the Seraphim strike fighter.

Colonial Marine Corps: A relatively small body but still numerous, this organisation is responsible for security aboard ship, protection detail for surface landings and guard duty. The aegis of this organisation also includes the elite Marine Force Recon (MF-R) teams and the shadowy Marine Force Black (MF-B), although the latter is largely under the control of the Office of Naval Intelligence. On occasion, the fleet will perform its own ground operations to reconnoitre/prepare the ground for the UCMA, at which point MF-B teams will usually be called for as they are even more capable warriors than the army's elite Praetorian teams.

In addition to the Fleet's fighting elements, the UCMF also includes two additional bodies, both absolutely vital to the war effort:

Fleet Logistical Corps: While unglamorous, this organisation is the third largest employer in the Colonies. It is responsible for the supply of the UCM's mighty battlefleets and ground forces while in theatre. Without it, the entire Reconquest would instantly grind to a halt. The FLC has access to almost as much tonnage as the Battlefleets themselves in the form of supply haulers and support staff. Many joke that if they were ever armed, the Reconquest could be over in a year, although of course the jokers seldom care about how their last meal got to them or where their tank's fuel and ammunition came from.

Office of Naval Intelligence: This mysterious organisation may be small but its influence spreads far and wide, including the ear of the President herself. This is the primary high level intelligence gathering organisation in the UCM. While Army Intelligence is largely concerned with battlefield-level activities, the ONI works on infiltrating the UCM's enemies far from the battlefront, counter espionage and keeping tabs on its own prominent citizens and officers. The extent of the latter operation is not widely known, but such activities have increased tenfold in recent months with increasing suspicion of PHR agents among senior positions in the Colonies, even as far as the High Council itself. The ONI is also tasked with answering some of the greatest questions currently troubling mankind, such as seeking the location of the PHR homeworld(s).

STRATEGIES

Battlefleet Organisation: Each individual Battlefleet is named for the system in which it is operating (eg. Battlefleet Eden and Battlefleet Shangri-La) and has a fluid, ever changing makeup. Ships are rotated between Battlefleets as the need arises and thus their size varies massively. Currently, Battlefleets Olympus and Ferrum are the largest, together encompassing almost half the entire UCMF's strength. Below the Battlefleet in hierarchy is the Taskforce, a fighting formation assembled to fulfil a specific mission in battle. Typically, a Taskforce will consist of between 3 and 30 capital ships with between 6 and 100 frigate tonnage vessels. Below the Taskforce is the Battlegroup, a collection of around 2-12 ships that fight together. Unlike the larger formations, Battlegroups are normally kept together as much as possible. As such, the ships' captains and crews can bond over time, becoming a more integrated and effective team. The smallest formation is the Squadron, a group of 2-8 ships, usually of the same class that fight in close proximity to each other, combining their talents to achieve a greater impact on the battlefield than they would do alone.

Planetary Invaders: The UCM naval machine is a highly focused entity, created for the single and driven purpose of recapturing humanity's lost Cradle Worlds and home planet from the dreaded Scourge. As a result, almost the entire fleet is geared towards planetary invasions and orbital assaults. It has a disproportionate number of strike carriers and troopships in its register, with more being constructed constantly. In effect, the fleet's true purpose is to bridge the gap between the Colonies and the surface of the Cradle Worlds, safely shepherding mankind's millions of soldiers to where they are needed. Its secondary purpose is defensive in nature – a task that has been sorely tested in recent months with the Scourge invasion of Ferrum.

Missile Halo: This is a collective term for a group of technologies designed to render enemy long range missile weapons around a planet ineffective. It is a complex network of scanners, drones and medium intensity lasers, both orbital and ground based designed to target and destroy enemy missiles with ruthless efficiency. The fleet deploys such systems in theatre in the early stages of an invasion, giving itself and its ground forces virtual impunity from nuclear strikes and long range high explosive missiles while the system remains in place.

The system can only be circumvented by directed energy weapons and very large, heavy or high speed solid projectiles (such as those fired by ship-borne mass drivers and orbital bombardment cannons). Every advanced race has access to similar technologies, and the presence of a missile halo in Scourge, PHR or Shaltari held territory is assumed by UCM military planners.

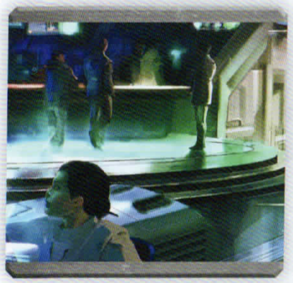
Evolving Designs: The UCM is a driven, dynamic entity on an upward curve of technological development. Given access to the resources and minds of all its Colonies towards a single goal, fantastic advancements and achievements have already been earned through collective effort and toil. This process is ongoing as mankind constantly seeks new paths to victory. As a result, new classes of starship are entering service on a monthly basis as humanity strives to regain its former grandeur.

SHIPS

Armour: All UCMF combat vessels are protected by layers of composite and metallic armour. This is often many meters thick and frequently multi-layered with several armour shells extending well into the central hull, almost akin to the skin of an onion. Each layer serves to break up solid projectiles into smaller, lower velocity fragments which are less likely to penetrate the next layer, and disperse directed energy attacks. As such, a ship's vital systems such as CIC, power cores and foldspace drive are located in the heart of the ship, furthest from harm.

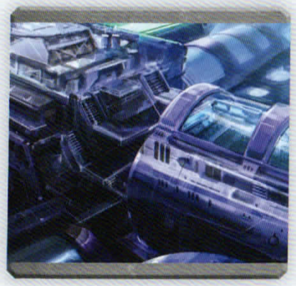
Compartmental Design: All UCM starships are designed on a compartmental basis so that damaged sections exposed to the void may be sealed off in microseconds from the rest of the ship, preventing wholesale decompression and appalling deaths for its crew. Such a concept dates back to the anti-flooding measures in early ocean craft although this works in reverse by keeping the atmosphere within rather than preventing ingress from without.

Crew: UCM ships depend ultimately on the sweat, toil and sacrifices of their all too human crews to fight on through the maelstrom of combat. Large starships are analogous to isolated towns due to their sheer scale, requiring everything from engineers, officers, marines, doctors, cooks and cleaners among a myriad of other professions. A typical frigate will have a crew between 200 and 300 souls, a cruiser around 600, and a battleship frequently over a thousand. That doesn't even include launch compliment (such as ground troops) if the ship has them. Such multitudes make the loss of a single ship a terrible thing to contemplate on a human level, necessitating a war-by-numbers approach that lower ranks find highly distasteful, but learn to live with if they survive long enough to progress to command status.



CIC: The Combat Information Centre (also known as the Operations Room or Bridge) is the heart of every ship and houses its captain, senior officers and support staff. If is from here that actions of the vessel are directed and decisions that affect the lives of hundreds of souls are made. It is always buried deep within the ship's hull and on capital ships, is coupled with an identical backup facility elsewhere, should this vital area be damaged. This room is the brain of the ship and without it, any chance of effective operations disappears.

Scanners and Comms: All ships require a complex system of scanners, optics and ECM systems to perform effectively in 27th Century naval warfare. The ability to hit an enemy ship in orbital combat depends far more on accurate targeting than it does on weapons range, highlighting just how vital these systems are in combat. Their effectiveness is mostly in relation to the technological prowess of their creators. As such, while effective, UCM scanners are generally inferior to those of more developed races such as the PHR or Shaltari but broadly equivalent to those of the Scourge who are only more advanced in certain areas. The largest UCM ships receive the most innovative and costly systems that mankind can produce and therefore gain an incremental benefit over standard combat vessels.



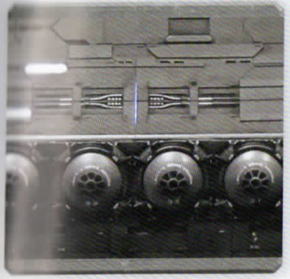
Power Cores: All colonial vessels are powered by at least one fusion-based power core, providing an almost inexhaustible supply of clean energy for its ship's ever demanding systems. Frigates typically have two, cruisers four and battleships up to eight cores, providing a level of redundancy in case of hull breach. These cores are designed to shut down uneventfully if damaged, but on rare occasions a catastrophic overload can occur, creating a supernova-like localised ball of pure energy which may take several nearby ships down with it.

Artificial Gravity Generators and Inertial Dampers: Human beings evolved on planet Earth with a gravity level of 1G and are most capable in conditions close to their home planet. As such, UCM shipwrights designed all military vessels to have as few zero-g environments as possible. In addition, a complex series of gravitational inertial dampers serve to reduce the high g-forces involved in combat manoeuvres. These systems are utterly critical if a ship is to make all but the gentlest of turns and expect its crew not to be glued to the walls, ceiling or deck by g-force, passed out in pools of their own vomit. Failure of these systems in combat can have 'interesting', but always calamitous effects on a ship's human component.

Gravity Nullifiers: For effective control of manoeuvre in orbit and the ability to maintain geosynchronous position at any altitude, gravity nullifiers are essential. They do as their name suggests and negate the effect of a planet's gravity on a ship so usual orbit speed restrictions no longer apply. Speed does not need to be maintained to prevent a fall to the surface and thus a ship can steer and position itself freely in distain of the physics that so hampered early space exploration. The major downside to these systems is considerable heat buildup – after a few days on station a ship must retreat from a planet or attain conventional orbital velocity in order to rest the systems. Loss of nullifiers in combat results in rapid orbital decay and inevitable fiery destruction at the hands of the planet's atmosphere unless the ship can propel itself clear with its sublight drives or repair the systems.

Foldspace Drives: The invention of the foldspace drive in the early 24th century was a major milestone in human history, enabling faster than light travel between the stars and thus unprecedented exploration and expansion. These allow virtually instant transference between any area of space away from any gravity wells – as such, ships must jump to around 6-10 hours sublight flight time from a target planet. UCM foldspace drives also require the presence of a foldspace node (a small marker device) in the vicinity of the destination, otherwise accurate travel becomes increasingly impossible the further the distance travelled. In addition, foldspace drives take several hours to charge and only a few dozen jumps can be initiated before the entire drive must be stripped and overhauled, necessitating limited use. A ship's foldspace drive can also be used to send communications to other systems when the ship would normally be able to jump – currently the only practical method the UCM has at its disposal for inter-system comms traffic.

Sublight Engines: All ships require sublight drives to manoeuvre and reposition. These systems rely on the ship's power core/s for energy and thus may drain power from other systems (such as weapons) when used on maximum thrust settings. Most UCM vessels have multiple thrust vectored engines in a clustered array, providing redundancy and resilience to damage while taking advantage of the practicalities of mass production.



Escape Pods: While the loss of millions of fighting men and women is a regrettable necessity of the Reconquest, the lives of its sailors matter deeply to the UCMF which will always plan to preserve them if possible. As such, all UCMF vessels feature lifeboat capacity far in excess of its crew compliment. The stalwart Shackleton class is the most common. With a capacity of 42 souls each, these medium sized craft can allow egress from a stricken ship in seconds, thrusting clear of any explosions under its own power and descending in a fiery (if controlled) one way decent to the planet below.

SHIP-BORNE WEAPONS

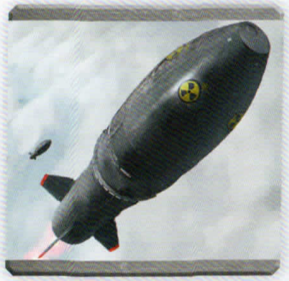
Mass Drivers: These are the standard ship-ship weapons in service with the UCMF. They are ubiquitous and almost every combat vessel will be at least partially armed with them. In principle, mass drivers are enormous versions of ground based railguns, using magnetism to propel a solid projectile at spectacular speeds, conveying vast amounts of destructive energy to the target. They are normally mounted in pairs or in threes on traversable turrets, making them highly flexible in combat. The most common types currently in use are the UF-2200, UF-4200 and UF-6400 – the number corresponding to the largest dimension of their rectangular calibre in mm.

Anti-Ship Lasers: A relatively recent addition to the UCMF's arsenal, these enormous directed energy weapons are capable of cutting to the core of a capital ship or slicing a frigate in half. They are normally too huge to be turret mounted and are instead integrated into a ship's hull, giving them a limited firing arc. A useful side effect of the vast energies involved is that the target ship's hull is heated to enormous temperatures, highlighting it for the targeting scanners of other ships. The most common type in service is the Cobra, with the gargantuan Viper being confined to a select few of the largest ships in the fleet.

Orbital Bombardment Cannon: Attacking and destroying surface-based targets from orbit is an essential pillar in the UCM's Reconquest strategy. While it intends to preserve most cities for eventual recapture, the precise application of localised devastation is crucial, as whole enemy formations or specific city districts can be wiped from the map. Most UCM orbital bombardment weapons such as the UF/B-8000 are enormous conventional cannons with very low muzzle velocity. High speed projectiles would actually be less effective, as they are more exposed to the stresses of re-entry. Instead, the sheer mass and size of these shells prevails – a single one of them is capable of levelling a tower block in the blink of an eye.

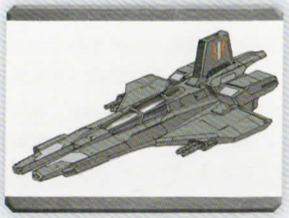
Missile Bays: Almost all UCMF vessels are equipped with some form of close action weapons suite, normally in the form of banks of concealed missile bays. These weapons are only effective at short range as at longer distances enemy point defences would destroy all of these relatively slow moving munitions. Even at close range, point defence still has an effect, making them best used against ships with poor point defence or combined in numbers capable of overcoming the ship's protections.

Point Defence Lasers: Every UCMF combat ship is equipped with some measure of anti-munitions point defence, usually in the form of banks of Aegis-V laser emplacements. These are almost universally effective at protecting ships from long range missile attack and are partially effective against close range assaults from missiles or bombers. Large ships feature dozens of these emplacements (a Beijing class battleship for example has 72 of them), making them impregnable to all but the most brutal enemy munitions attacks.

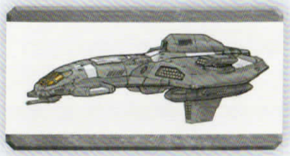


Nuclear Warheads: Most UCM capital ships carry a small compliment of thermonuclear warheads. As it has been since their very first use in 1945, these are weapons of dire circumstance. Wholesale destruction and near permanent irradiation of the ground is rarely the objective and this is all that these weapons can achieve. However, in certain circumstances they are used as they have destructive power far in excess of almost anything else available. Multi-megaton strategic warheads capable of levelling whole cities are only occasionally unleashed against targets the UCM does not need to capture, including enemy asteroid/moon instillations. Low-yield, low ionisation tactical warheads also have a more useful role on the battlefield on occasion. In all cases however, an enemy missile halo makes their use impossible, necessitating the destruction of all defensive assets before a target site can be nuked from orbit.

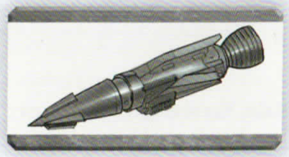
STRIKE CRAFT



Fighters: The Fleet Air Arm employs a variety of void-capable fighter craft, the most common being the Voidblade. Far larger than its atmospheric cousin the Archangel, this craft has a crew of four and is designed for close protection sorties of friendly ships against enemy bombers and close action munitions. It is also an excellent interceptor capable of engaging enemy fighters while protecting friendly bomber formations. Launched from the UCMF's fleet carriers, these tiny craft are often crucial to victory.



Bombers: The standard anti-ship strike craft employed by the Fleet Air Arm is the Voidhammer, a heavy bomber with a crew of seven. These craft carry a range of heavy munitions designed to inflict crippling damage to starships when used en-mass. Bombers have a distinct advantage over conventional munitions as they can close to firing range at far higher speeds than ships, effectively lending the host carrier a long range strike capability in excess of what its own guns can normally achieve.



Torpedoes: Not to be confused with missiles, a UCM torpedo is amammoth self-propelled, guided munition. At just over 200m in length a torpedo is larger than some starships and packs an enormous explosive payload. Its vast size is partly to overcome countermeasures – the torpedo's hull is covered in many meters of armour, making point defence weapons designed to stop missiles ineffective. UCM torpedoes are designed to explode after penetration, ripping huge chunks of a capital ship's hull into the void of vaporising a frigate in one colossal blast.

Dropships: These are atmospheric aircraft designed to deliver vehicles and mechanised infantry to combat hot zones. The most common types operated by the UCMA's Army Air and Space Corps are the Albatross, Osprey, Condor and Raven. They are fast, agile and small, making them suitable for first wave assaults against hardened targets. They are normally delivered to the battlefield by strike carriers since these vessels are atmospheric-capable. While they can carry a multitude of armoured units, they cannot efficiently deploy the numbers needed for protracted wars or planetary occupations.

Bulk Landers: The UCMA's bulk landers are the primary method of planetfall for the vast majority of colonial ground troops. They have a far higher capacity than any dropship and are fully void capable, allowing them to be deployed by cruiser sized troopships – massive vessels capable of carrying up to 60,000 men. The most common type of bulk lander in service in 2672 is the Heavylift-IIB, an unglamorous but vital link in the invasion chain. The major downside to bulk landers is that they are large and slow when compared to dropships - easy pickings for ground fire when the enemy is prepared for invasion.

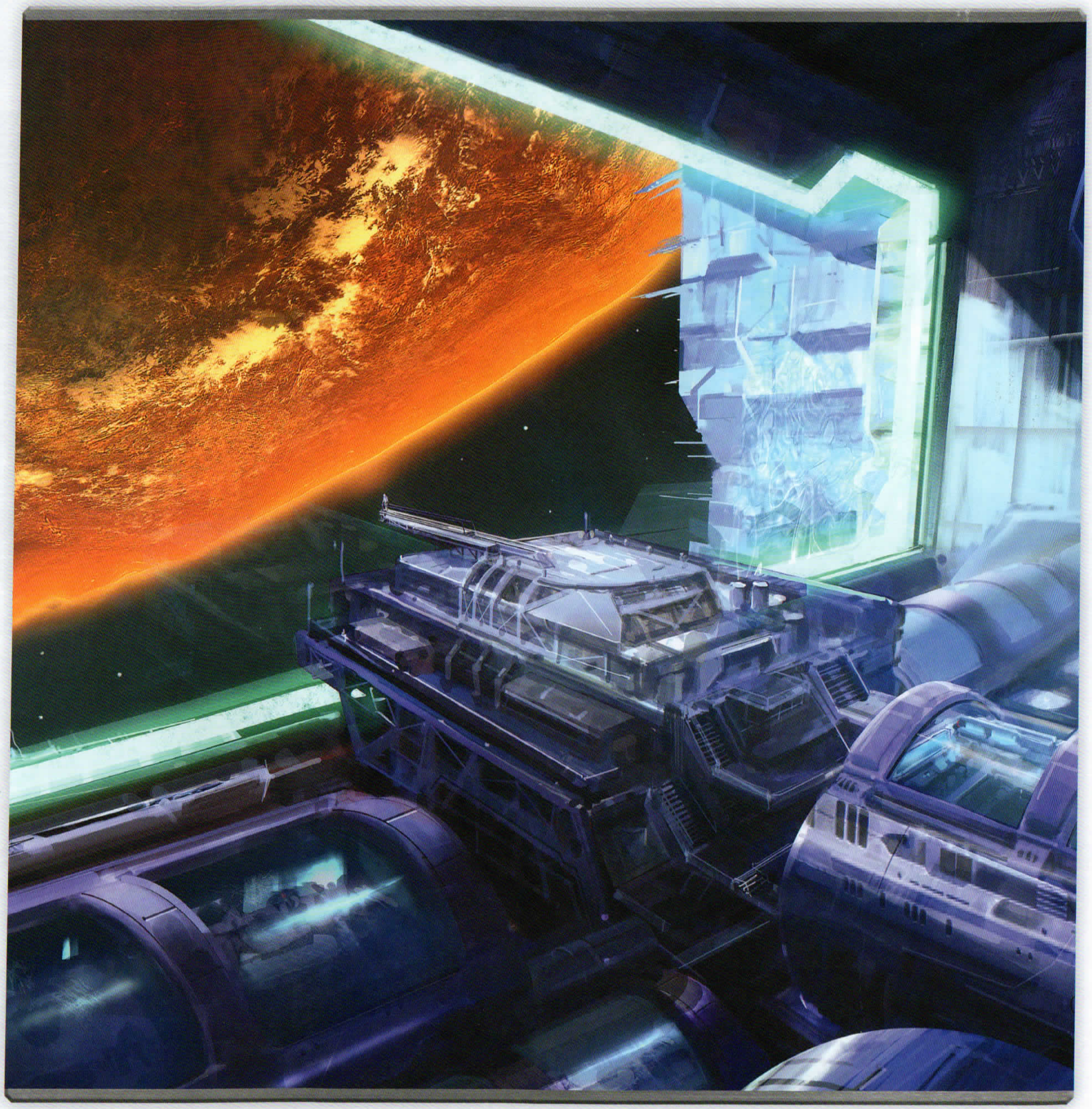
GROUND ASSETS

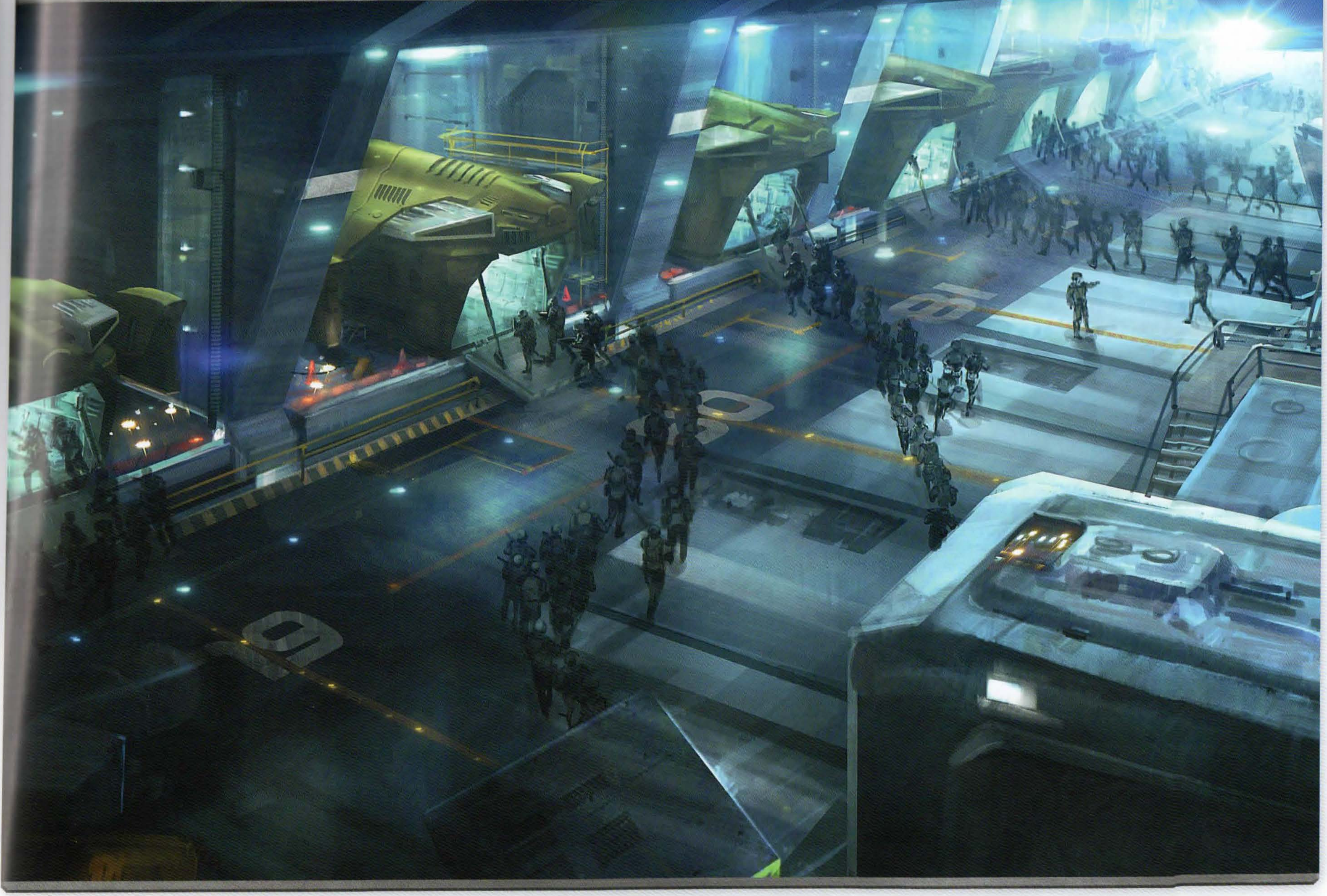
Armoured Formations: The Colonial Armoured Corps are the spearhead of the UCMA, usually deployed by dropship in aggressive actions. These formations encompass almost all armoured vehicles

Including the formidable Colonial Tank Battalions which are the most dangerous ground-based groups the UCMA has to offer. Armoured vehicles are highly effective in decimating enemy presence on the ground although they are vulnerable to orbital bombardment as they must always operate in the open.

Infantry Formations: The majority of soldiers in service to the UCM are members of the Colonial Legionnaire Corps. With each legion comprising around a million fighting men, these are colossal entities designed to conquer whole planets when brought together. Most legionnaires are deployed by bulk lander although some are mechanised and deployed by Bear APC and Condor dropships. Infantry are highly effective at holding ground in urban environments when deployed en-mass and are resilient to orbital bombardment, since they can hide in buildings for some measure of protection.

Defence Batteries: Bulk landers can also deploy Aegis-IV orbital defence batteries. These laser weapons are surface-based variants of the fleet's standard point defence armament, the Aegis V. On the ground, these pieces of hardware are massive in comparison to tanks, lending a sense of scale to the colossal starships of the UCMF. These batteries are deployed to fortify captured ground and are highly effective at destroying enemy bulk landers before they can deploy and are partially effective against dropship formations.

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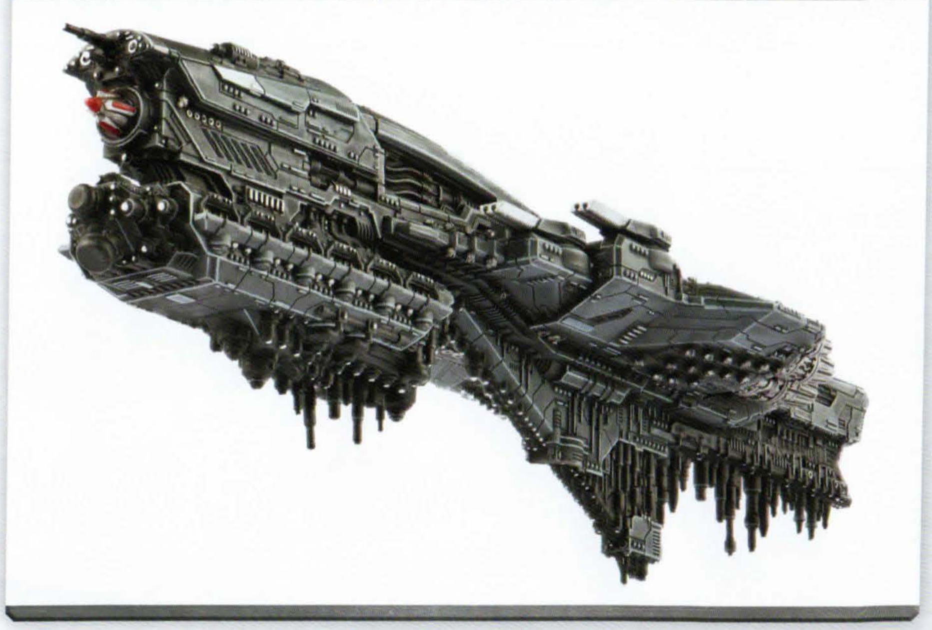
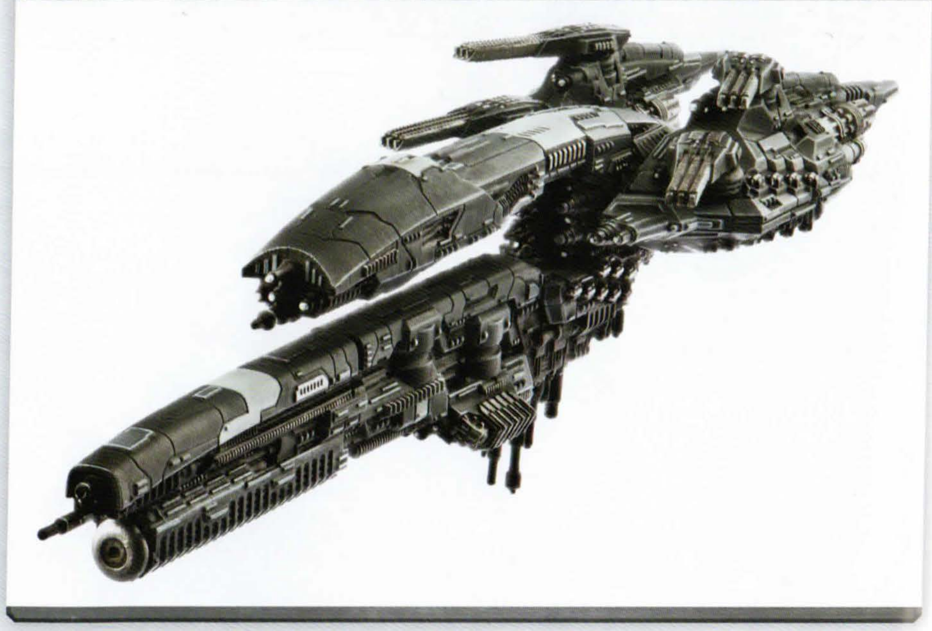
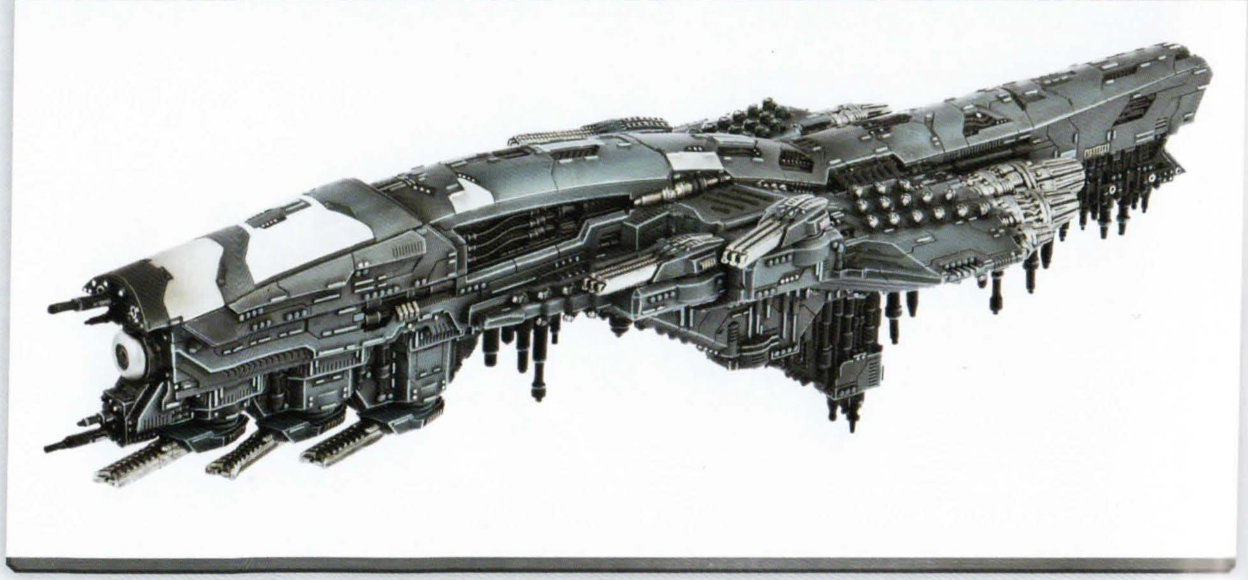
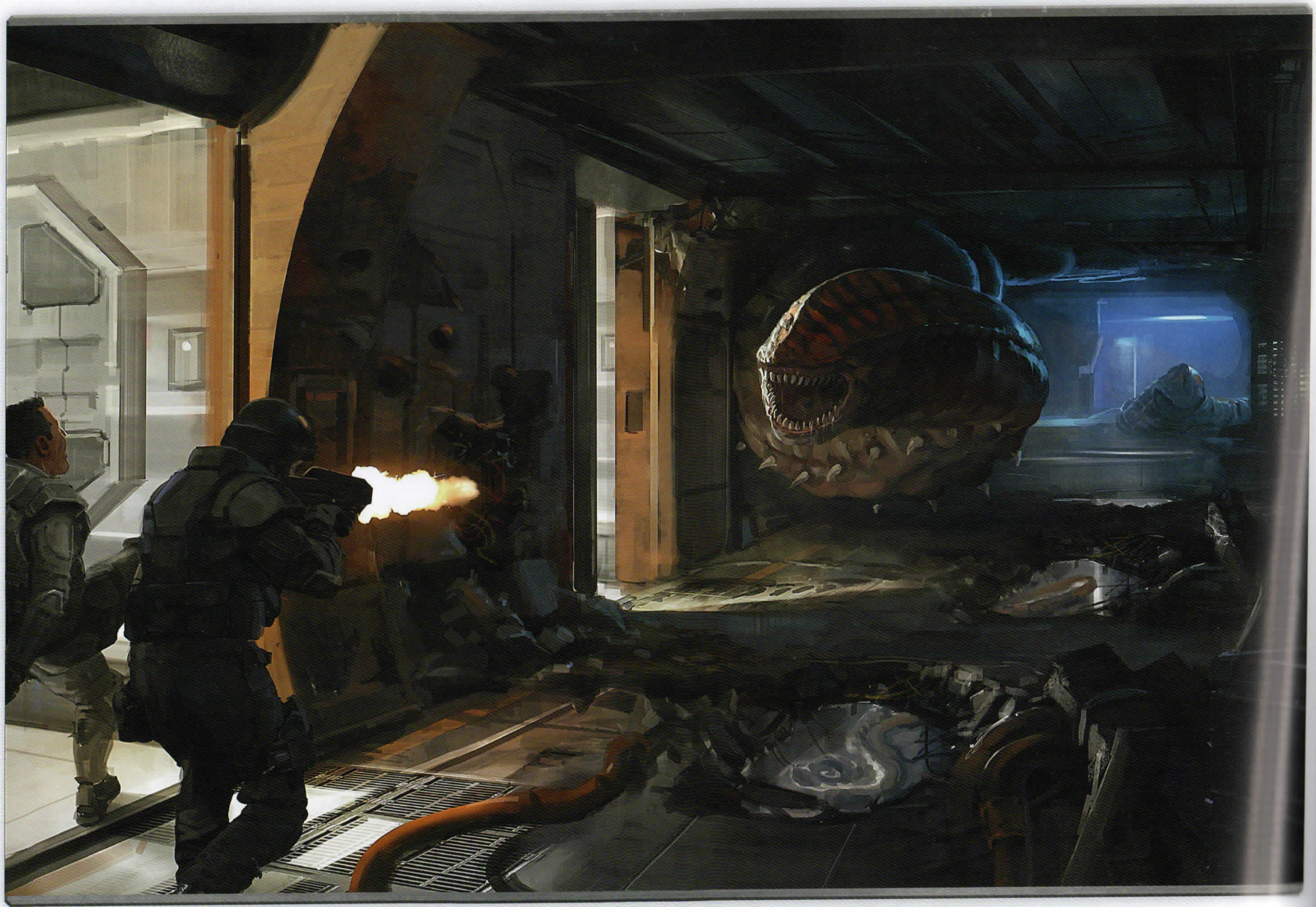








THE SCOURGE

The Scourge are foul, neuro-parasitic lifeforms which can utterly dominate an unfortunate host, bending its life to their will. They thrive on the conquest and absorption of other races, their very mode of existence as potent a threat as their formidable fleets. They are the Galaxy's ultimate predators.

Their breathtaking assimilation of the central planets, including Earth itself, has made them the primary threat to the very existence of mankind. Their ships are as aggressive as they are shockingly lethal, but violent death at the hand of their potent weaponry is nothing compared to the dread of being boarded and taken alive...

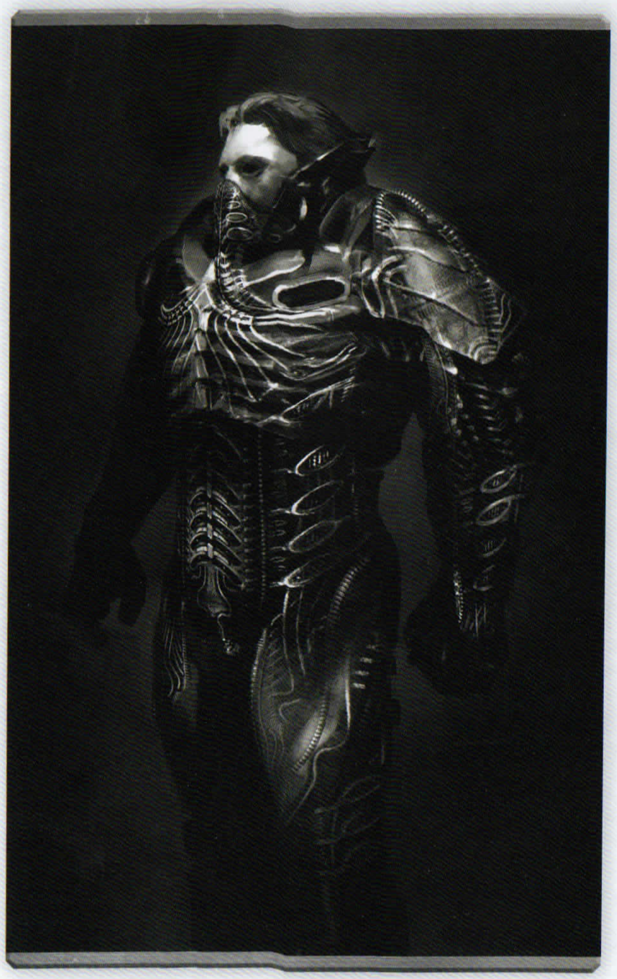
'PURE' SCOURGE

Outside a host, a Scourge isn't much to look upon, sickening though they undoubtedly are. Scourge adults are wispy, boneless, soft bodied creatures, frail in the extreme. Indeed, their fetid bodies are hard to identify amongst the myriad swirling tendrils of extremities.

A Scourge can survive for its full lifespan without a host. It has been postulated that the Scourge evolved independently from hosts and only presented neuro-parasitic abilities late in their development. Once beyond the larval stage, in fact, it becomes impossible for a Scourge to take a host at all, and it must henceforth live as a pathetic, fragile creature for the remainder of its foul existence. A drive for physical improvement ultimately led the Scourge to find strength in the bodies of other races.

Pure Scourge are obviously unsuited for the open battlefield. Indeed, in gravity beyond 0.5G a Scourge cannot even move outside a liquid. However, throughout their mighty ships, Pure Scourge are known to swim through veins of black viscous liquid, serving unknowable command and control functions.

Recent intelligence suggests that the aliens find life within a capable host body to be vastly preferable to life melded to machine constructs, as their host-less cousins must be doomed to. Indeed, this has led to an insatiable desire to find fresh hosts, a factor which must surely be at the root of their unquenchable thirst to conquer all free lifeforms.



TAKING A HOST

To live with any degree of potency, a Scourge must take a carbon-based host early in its life. Recent spy drone footage from within the dreaded Scourge 'breeding hives' has shed some light on the process. The Scourge larvae first enters the host through the ear canal, burrowing into the soft tissues of the head before worming its way into the brain and later the spinal cord, resulting in much loss of blood and fluids.

This process is conducted while the prospective host is fully conscious so the attendants can monitor the parasites' progress. As the Scourge takes control, the levels of unendurable agony expressed by the victim escalate to such a level it would end its own suffering in any way it could were it not restrained. This is only the first stage however, as it takes weeks and in some cases months for the Scourge to gain full control of the host, all the while under monumental stresses of anguish and pain.

Externally, captured hosts retain their normal physical characteristics in the early stages of possession. Internally though, the Scourge will have fully developed into a web of gelatinous fibres, bound to the nervous system of the host. Fortunately, these newly dominant Scourge must learn to use their new bodies and are reportedly clumsy and badly coordinated for months, making it impossible to use these human-looking newborns as spies or infiltrators.

In a fairly short time, external characteristics become obvious. A heightened thirst, coupled with a constant sweat is the first noticeable sign of possession. Curiously, hosts lose the ability to produce colour pigment, and over time become more and more palid, the eyes eventually turning a sickly red. Their thirst and perspiration also heightens with time, eventually reaching a stage where they routinely drink the blood of the fallen, comrades and enemies alike.

The Scourge prolongs the life of the host but ultimately ages itself, although it can live for several centuries. When the Scourge eventually begins to die, the host becomes increasingly erratic and jerky, as the Scourge's iron grip on its nervous system deteriorates. Eventually, the Scourge dies, closely followed by the host, wracked with insanity and pain. Such late-stage behaviour has no place aboard a warship, and Scourge exhibiting such signs are normally euthanized before they can disrupt the finely balanced running of a vessel at war.

The fact that late-stage Scourge become raging, psychopathic killing machines makes them highly useful close combat troops though, and those in Scourge ground armies are put to use in specialised squads that are the among very worst horrors faced by the Legions.

Tragically, no cure has been found, and any attempt to remove the Scourge results in the death of the host. Horrifically, it is now known that a measure of the human consciousness survives under the domination of the parasite, an existence of perpetual pain and suffering ended only by death. As the Scourge slowly dies, the wracked, inevitably insane psyche of the host begins to break through, hence the erratic behaviour exhibited in late-stage hosts.

They use no audible sound to communicate, and it has recently been confirmed that they use complex and highly modulated multi-spectra electromagnetic waves to converse with other Scourge in close vicinity. Such methods can in theory be interfered with, although only on the same level as broadcasting loud noise to stop audible communications - something not really practical en-mass. Early attempts to block this in the field have caused great discomfort to UCM troops anywhere nearby, limiting the usefulness of such technologies for the moment. In any case, recent events illustrate that a Scourge with a human host has full command of language and can communicate with humans if it deigns to. However, this has only happened once in almost 200 years of bitter hatred and few expect such events to be common, as the Scourge evidently view human beings as little more than cattle.

Another recent development has been the discovery of Scourge attempts to grow bio-accelerated human hosts for implantation as the source for new natural hosts has long since slowed to a trickle of captured Resistance fighters. It seems that the Scourge regard humans as virtually perfect hosts, especially in human-created environments of course, fuelling their need to create more. Fortunately, most of these endeavours seem to have had a poor success rate, with mountains of deformed and useless corpses reported burned outside such facilities. If the enemy should ever unlock the means of making this process work on an industrial scale, it's likely that mankind's armies would be hopelessly overrun.

USURPERS BY NATURE

It seems increasingly likely that the Scourge may be able to make use of a measure of the host's memories, an insidious and ominous prospect explaining their continued use of human structures and systems. Indeed, this can be seen as a highly efficient mode of conquest, since a ready-made environment exists amongst the host's former possessions. Indeed, whole orbital instillations captured from humanity have been repurposed or used by the enemy rather than scuttled, since it's far more efficient than building new ones.

In this way, the Scourge not only absorb the bodies, but also the technology, knowledge and power base of their vanquished prey. This goes a long way towards explaining the level of sophistication evident in Scourge technology. As the Scourge conquer, they only become more potent as the Galaxy's apex predator.

OCCUPATION

The Scourge occupation of the Cradle worlds and Earth itself has been a living nightmare for the few resistance fighters who remain. Tales have been told of the Scourge's ceaseless persecution of these poor souls, whose capture would inevitably swell the ranks of the enemy. Being taken alive is their greatest fear, and all carry cyanide capsules to bring them merciful deliverance should they be taken. Non-human inhabitants of the Cradle Worlds aren't so fortunate in their understanding of the invaders, and whole species on some planets have been absorbed into the Scourge hegemony. Most notably, some of the most terrifying beasts from Shangri-La's moons, Helen and Persephone, have been bred en-mass for parasite implantation by the Scourge, a race which clearly values savagery and power above most other factors in a host.

Some resistance groups did manage to remain free however, and years before the invasion were becoming a frequent (albeit minor) thorn in the side of the Scourge. Their greatest achievement was the protection and maintenance of the archaic human Foldspace nodes, allowing UCM vessels to travel accurately to these stricken worlds. Without this brave and hopeful act, the Reconquest would not have been possible at all, and now the Colonies owe an eternal debt to these beleaguered souls. Resistance groups on worlds where the UCM has made planetfall are normally instant allies, and have generally been a highly useful asset and the source of much intelligence. However, the horror of occupation has turned many such bands savage, making them opposed to all outsiders with a vicious and feral hatred.

In general though, the Scourge have been able to fully exploit captured planets, running all once human industrial centres 24 hours a day, and often augmenting and expanding them with their own, sinisterly organic looking structures. One practice of note is the construction of seed ships, surface built vessels sent among the stars to seek new worlds to conquer.

LEADERSHIP

How the Scourge are directed is still a complete mystery. Some sort of highly effective command and control system must be in place (given the breathtaking organisation and purpose of the invasion). There are many theories, but little concrete intel. It was a Priority-One objective of Reconquest Phase-One to identify the Scourge leadership mechanism and caste, although this effort has largely met with failure thus far. With the involvement of the Shaltari and PHR in the conflict, UCM intelligence gathering assets have been stretched to the limit.

One useful piece of information has emerged though. It was previously thought that the Scourge had no 'individuals', distinct characters within their society (if one could use such a word). Most saw them as simple 'drones', devoid of ambition or individuality; however, undeniably different characters have emerged, with beyond 'normal' behavioural patterns. These may be Scourge within hosts or Scourge implanted into war machines on the ground, it seems to make no difference, indicating that this comes from the parasite itself and not remnants of the host's psyche.

This revelation has led to the conclusion that while all Scourge work towards the good of their race and are far more prone to acts of self-sacrifice, they do have separate sentience. Most often, those that prominently show such traits are destined for leadership roles and are perhaps the greatest thinkers of their race. Officers of the UCMF certainly believe so, and observe that many individual Scourge ships behave differently to the normal pattern. This fact alone led to the continuation of the practice of assigning names to Scourge ships, since it can be used as a tool for recognition and thus prediction of battlefield tactics.

ARMIES

Scourge armies are vast and formidable military machines, potentially exceeding the manpower of the UCM in fighting troops. A crucial difference is that human soldiers must volunteer to fight, while the Scourge are simply born to serve their race until death in whatever capacity is required of them.

The bulk of Scourge combat troops are made up of human hosts, the very same individuals assimilated after the Scourge invasion over 160 years ago. The hosts that the enemy used to invade the Cradle Worlds in that original invasion, the so called 'Lizard Warriors', are now mostly dead and no new examples have been sighted, indicating that that species has been completely exhausted by the Scourge. Other alien bioforms such as the dreaded Destroyers, Screamers and Razorworms are well known to be bred by the Scourge specifically as hosts, since their sheer lethality is considered too sublime to be allowed to reach full extinction. New species from the Cradle Worlds have already been used for such purposes, including the winged horrors known as Vampires. Such outlandish hosts have also been reported by boarding parties on Scourge ships, leading UCM scientist to assume that they are used for specific purposes where a non-human body layout would be better suited.

Scourge ground armies also make use of a wide range of fiendishly organic looking and deadly war machines. Lethally swift grav-tanks such as the Hunter, Slayer and Executor are commonplace, as are walkers like the ominously skittering Prowlers and Stalkers. Larger and even more outlandish constructs are also known, such as the towering Annihilator or looming Desolator. All these vehicles are implanted with a pure Scourge 'pilot' melded to the vehicle in a permanent communion of jellied flesh and armoured plate. Such a practice is thought of as second best to taking a host, lending an added level of viciousness to these bio-organic entities above even Scourge infantry. Such technology is also well known to be used aboard ships for various constructs, not least the swarms of fighters and bombers that plague the skies and orbits of the Cradle Worlds.

THE SCOURGE FLEET

Scourge naval power is vast and formidable. The aliens are known to possess thousands upon thousands of ships ranging from silent infiltrators to vast super-dreadnoughts - the largest ships ever encountered by mankind.

UCM military planners were aware of this long before the Reconquest plans were finalised and the UCMF was built up accordingly to counter the dire threat that Scourge naval power represented. With appalling losses on both sides already, it remains to be seen whether this building effort was enough to overcome the fleets that conquered eight whole systems in a matter of days.

Scourge fleets are fluid, ever changing entities that shift between systems constantly, making it difficult for strategists to get a clear picture of enemy shipping patterns. In general, the aliens seem keen to keep a heavy garrison presence in every system they have conquered, ensuring a hard and brutal fight every time a new front is opened. As defenders (although their assault on Ferrum has recently changed this dynamic), the Scourge must spread their recourses carefully, never committing too many ships to one area only to leave an opening in another. It is this fact alone that gives the UCMF a chance in this war, as despite the ever increasing pace of ship production, it is estimated that Scourge vessels outnumber those of the UCMF by roughly 1.5:1.

The location of the birthworld of the Scourge race is still unknown. Indeed, many believe that it no longer exists and that the vile aliens only subsist through the subjugation of other races. What is known is that full sized Scourge starships are not manufactured anywhere in known space. While repair facilities exist above the Cradle Worlds (usually in the form of modified human ones), no shipyards have yet been sighted. The location of the Scourge fleet's home port remains a mystery that the Office of Naval Intelligence is still pursuing with vigour although with little success so far.

Consequently, it must be assumed that the Scourge have territories beyond the Cradle Worlds and Earth. Current thinking suggests that these are not expansive, as the aliens have so far been unable to bring enough ships to the Olympus or Ferrum theatres to win decisive victory. The reinforcements that arrived during the first climactic battles there were largely siphoned off from the garrison fleets of other Cradle World systems and from Earth itself. It seems that the Scourge must operate with what they have – assets which are known are always to be preferred to unknown ones. However, this gives the Admiralty little solace, as the known assets of Scourge naval forces are vast and perhaps more than a match for humanity's mighty Battlefleets – only time and further slaughter will tell.

SCOURGE STRATEGIES

Victory or Death: Thus far in the Reconquest, not a single Scourge ship has been reported to flee from a system they have conquered. The enemy will ALWAYS remain until every last vessel has been destroyed. Why this is the case is unclear, but the result is that Scourge fleet presence, even in virtually conquered systems is notoriously difficult to remove entirely. The potential for lightning strike and fade raids on supply convoys is a constant threat. This necessitates escort patrols and the use of assets that are sorely needed elsewhere for hunter-killer sweeps in an attempt to remove the taint of the enemy once and for all. Perhaps this is the very reason that the Scourge will fight on long after all hope is lost. What is certain is that while sentient, Scourge lifeforms have always been willing and prepared to sacrifice their lives if it serves the purpose of their race.

Usurpation and Reuse: One of the well known reasons for the Scourge's successes and potency is their ability to adapt, reuse, repurpose and augment captured assets from conquered races. The Scourge recognise the effort and resources expended to create such things as orbital docks, defence emplacements and shipyard facilities and will bend them to their will rather than scuttle them. Typically, these will be crewed by hosts of the species that created the constructs in the first place, in this case human ones. Since the facilities were designed for human bodies to operate, this makes a great deal of sense. It also makes the Scourge even more dangerous, as they can turn an opponent's recourses against them in a shockingly short time after capture which is something humans could never do with most Scourge technology. As a result, the Scourge have built surprisingly few facilities of their own and instead mostly make use of the extensive orbital networks created over the Cradle Worlds by mankind during its golden age.

Surprise Attack: The Scourge are masters of massed shock assaults, embodied in their breathtakingly brutal subjugation of the Cradle Worlds and Earth. More recently, they have demonstrated this ability once again with the sudden and unexpected invasion of the UCM colony of Ferrum. This should be a lesson to all other races that to try and predict or underestimate the Scourge's potential for focused aggression is foolhardy in the extreme.

Seed Ships: The only Scourge voidcraft known to be manufactured on the Cradle Worlds are the Seed Ships. These vessels are far too small to be considered fighting ships but are being built and launched from the surface of every captured world in large numbers. Current thinking suggests that these constructs make random foldspace jumps throughout the galaxy in the hope of encountering another sentient race to conquer. Always in need of organic hosts, this enterprise is surely crucial to the future expansion of the Scourge race given the resources expended in return for a small hope of success at the mercy of the vagrancies of chance.

Ancient Vessels: By comparing the fragmented records of those ships that survived the carnage of the Scourge invasions from early battles during the invasion to modern day, it is clear that many Scourge ships currently active are the same as those encountered 165 years ago. By studying the telling signatures of wear on the cleanest of these ships and the most pitted and scarred examples, it is estimated that some enemy vessels may be well over 1000 years old, although this is merely a guess. In any case, Scourge naval technology appears not to have changed much since the invasion, although recent reports suggest that the enemy is responding to the new realities inflicted by the Reconquest with never before seen horrors of the void...

SHIPS

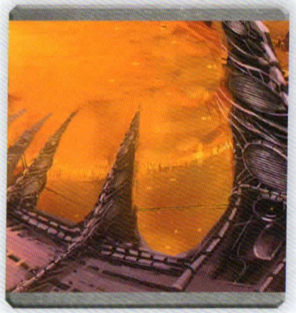
Naming Conventions: Keeping track of the enemy and its deeds is crucial in wartime - information is victory. Since the Scourge have only ever communicated with humanity one single time, the true names of Scourge ships are unknown, if they even have them at all. As such, the captains that encounter them are responsible for naming them and logging their precise energy signatures into the register – currently the best known method of accurately identifying enemy ships. Such a policy is essential study, should any discernable patterns emerge. It has already become clear that 'personality' and individualist behaviour is evident in particularly infamous ships, shedding the notion that all Scourge are 'drones', mindlessly fighting for their race without conscious thought.

Armour: All Scourge ships are encased in a solid shell of composite armour that appears 'grown' rather than made. While certainly non-organic, the manner in which Scourge vessels are constructed is clearly far from anything understood by humanity. This armour is tougher than that produced by mankind but is mostly only present in a single exoskeleton, making it marginally less effective overall. However, this allows for more room for internal systems and storage, generally increasing the capacity of Scourge ships to include advanced systems and cavernous strike craft hangars.

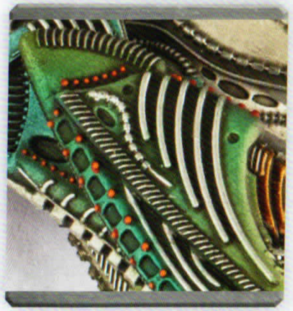
Crew: To say that the biological component of Scourge vessels is unusual would be an understatement. It is well known that 'pure' Scourge (those without a host) are often melded to manufactured vehicles and this is certainly the case within Scourge ships. Besides mobile constructs such as loading and repair machines, banks of melded pure Scourge are known to reside at the core of their ships, forming a Gestalt consciousness that may be described as its 'soul'. This takes on some of the roles for which humans would employ computers, although such entirely artificial thinking engines are also known to be present. In addition to this, Scourge with hosts (normally human at this time) walk the habitable sections of their ships, fulfilling roles a biological body is best for. Of course, accommodations for such entities are usually needed, especially in ships that include landing forces.

Bridge: From the limited number of boarding actions undertaken, Scourge ships are known to usually feature a command centre of sorts, somewhat similar to a UCM vessel's CIC. Buried deep within the hull, these areas are a hideous amalgam of machine and biology, featuring host species never witnessed anywhere else and frequently conjoined with the ship's systems by coils of obscene looking piping. It is theorised that these are hosts chosen for their superior neural connections and reactions, making them ideal ship's captains. However, it is not unknown for human-based Scourge hosts to appear to command a ship, lending credence to the theory that this race does employ a merit system of some kind, allowing particularly talented individuals to transcend their host's biological limitations. Whatever host species are present on the bridge, a form of communion with the ship's pure Scourge gestalt consciousness must be present, as Scourge ships behave far more like gracefully deadly living entities than machines in battle.

Scanners and Comms: Scanners, optics and accurate targeting systems are just as important to the Scourge as they are to humans. It is known that these alien systems are around the same level of effectiveness as UCM ones, highlighting how much progress has been made since the Scourge invasion 165 years ago. Without these systems, an accurate firing solution would be impossible to achieve, rendering weapon range meaningless.



Power Cores: All Scourge vessels feature a fusion power core. Their configuration differs from UCM ones in that Scourge ships seem only ever to feature a single, enormous unit capable of powering the entire ship's demanding systems. These are certainly more advanced than human ones, as Scourge oculus weapons are estimated to be twice as power-hungry as mass drivers, although the generally lower mass of Scourge ships may mitigate this somewhat since the drives require less power and are also likely to be more efficient. The presence of a single 'heart' in every Scourge ship is well known to the gunnery crews of colonial vessels who are trained to aim for them if the opportunity presents itself, although they are normally buried in the most heavily armoured areas on the ship.



Gravity Control Systems: Control and manipulation of gravity is essential for effective orbital combat, both within and without a ship. In the case of the Scourge, this is achieved through a network of small linked gravity control cores spread throughout the ship. These keep the ship isolated from the pull of a planet's gravity well and create artificial gravity and inertial damping within the ship in areas where it is required. In this regard, Scourge ships are known to have many more zero-g environments aboard than human vessels, possibly due to the Scourge brain being far more at home with such conditions than the human one. It seems that switching of gravity states is done seamlessly and often, selecting the appropriate conditions for the task at hand.

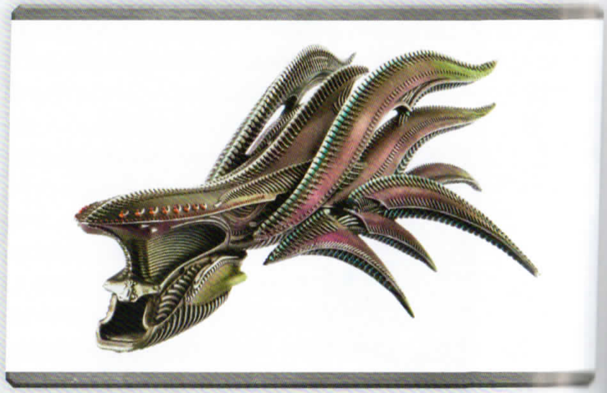
Foldspace Drives: Scourge foldspace drives are very similar in operation and restrictions as human ones. Their ships still need coded nodes near the jump location for accurate translation and Scourge drives require a similarly long recharge time. It does appear though that alien drives have much greater longevity, allowing them to jump between their domains at will and often, seldom needing refits or overhauls.

Sublight Engines: All Scourge vessels feature sublight engines to propel and direct their ships. These engines are clearly more powerful and dynamic than those of most other races – giving Scourge vessels a combat speed matched by few opponents. This is a crucial factor, as Scourge weaponry is at its most dangerous at close ranges.

Manoeuvre Fins: While UCM ships steer predominantly by thrust vectoring, Scourge ships steer mainly by the manipulation of gravity when in orbit. This is achieved by aspects of the ship's gravity control network present in its distinctive 'fins'. These fins move during manoeuvres, the physical adjustments aiding the effect of the gravity manipulations. Coupled with their physical appearance, this only adds to the impression of a Scourge vessel being a living entity rather than a constructed one.

Stealth Systems: Some Scourge ships are equipped with a series of systems designed to mask limited weapons fire from enemy scanners when running silent. This allows such vessels to run at an extremely low signature and still unleash some firepower without raising attention directly. This is a highly potent ability as it becomes it much more difficult for the enemy to return fire accurately, making these ships some of the most hated and devious of all Scourge vessels.

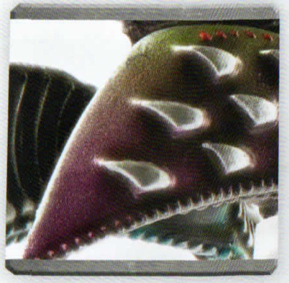
Cloaks: A limited number of Scourge ships also feature a related technology known as a 'cloak'. This does not actually make a ship physically invisible but it does serve to quickly reduce or entirely dissipate the effect of harsh manoeuvres and weapons fire on a ship's signature. These systems can vary in effectiveness from partial to full. In the case of a full cloak, the ship on which it is mounted cannot build up any additional energy signature beyond its normal one, allowing it to unleash all its weapons which would normally make it an easy target for all enemy ships in the vicinity. The only downside of such systems is that they take up considerable space aboard ship, somewhat reducing its firepower when compared to its equivalents from other races. However, silent kills are always valued highly by the Scourge who above all favour sneak attack and ambush to pitched battle.



SHIP-BORNE WEAPONS

Oculus Beam Weapons: These directed energy weapons are the mainstay of most Scourge combat ships with almost every vessel equipped with several. When fired, these weapons unleash a split-second burst of high intensity energy which causes a range of devastating effects on a solid target. These beams are created by controlled detonations within the Scourge ship itself, explaining their brief but potent energies. In effect, they behave more like conventional weapons rather than lasers due to their brief intensity – slamming the target suddenly rather than slicing it. Their destructive potential also increases when Scourge ships get close to their prey due to lower beam diffraction, an attribute which suits this aggressive race's nature perfectly. In addition, these bursts can be directed accurately in multiple directions from the eye-like protuberances on Scourge ships, lending these formidable weapons their name as well as their flexibility.

Furnace Cannons: These directed energy weapons produce a sustained beam of incandescent energy created to slice deep through hulls. In use, these lasers behave similarly to UCM equivalents although they are usually mounted in pairs. Most furnace cannons also provide Scourge captains with two fire modes – a multi-beam attack best employed against targets with weak armour and a focused attack that is almost guaranteed to do damage but in a more localised area. This second fire mode also has the added advantage of causing such spectacular heat build-up on the target as to make it more visible to scanners and thus the targeting arrays of other Scourge ships.



Plasma Cannons: Scourge ships also make use of the plasma weapon technology that has made their ground units so feared. These weapons utilise a ball of superheated plasma, temporarily sustained and contained by a solid core. These are enormously destructive although finite in range, since once their core's power is expended, the shroud of plasma dissipates harmlessly. Space-borne versions of these weapons are far larger than their ground-based cousins and although more destructive, the size of their munitions make it possible for enemy point defence to neutralise them before they hit their target. Due to all these factors, their use is normally confined to close quarters where they can inflict horrendous damage.

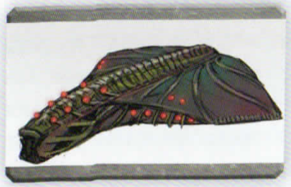
Plasma Bombards: These weapons are oversized versions of plasma cannons designed for the orbital bombardment role. They feature a massively outsized power core launched at low velocity, capable of sustaining its plasma shroud long enough to reach the surface. Once it does, the effects are as awe inspiring as they are horrific. A single blast is more than capable of reducing an entire city block to molten glass, searing the retinas of all unfortunate enough to witness the devastation up close.

Reverse-Grav Weapons: These are highly unusual devices unique to the Scourge. They fire solid projectiles with an extremely advanced powered core that reverses the effect of gravity. As such, these slugs are actually repelled by the effect of gravity. These weapons are always mounted in an upward firing position and are most effective when fired close to a planet's surface where the effect of gravity is most pronounced. While launched at low velocity, the projectiles gain speed quickly as they ascend towards their targets above. This makes them consummate anti-orbital weapons, perfect for engaging enemy starships from atmosphere.

Point Defence Beamers: Every Scourge fighting ship is laced with a network of small point defence laser weapons. Their beams emanate from rows of small eye-like structures similar to those of oculus weapons although they function like miniature furnace cannons, creating a sustained beam of energy capable of sweeping the void of incoming munitions and strike craft.

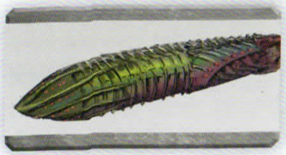
Nuclear Warheads: Most Scourge capital ships are known to carry nuclear warheads for similar reasons to the UCM. Interestingly, thus far in the Reconquest, mankind has proved more willing to use them than the Scourge. Theorists suggest that the Scourge are more ready to sacrifice lives to hold or capture ground rather than permanently deny it to the enemy. What is certain is that much like humanity, the Scourge would prefer to keep the worlds for which it fights intact rather than flatten and irradiate them. However, the potential for nuclear annihilation is always present and no doubt the vile aliens take pleasure in unleashing these ultimate bringers of destruction when the situation calls for it.

STRIKE CRAFT



Fighters: The Scourge employ a range of small void-capable interceptors, the most common of which is the Hellscream – a fearsome predator able to hunt down and annihilate enemy strike craft, missiles and fighters while protecting Scourge ships form attacks. Armed with banks of heavy plasma cannons, these lighting fast craft are the bane of bomber crews everywhere.

Bombers: The use of offensive strike craft is second nature to the Scourge. This is best personified by the infamous Hellmaw bomber – a large strike craft capable of crippling a capital ship when unleashed in numbers. These constructs were some of the most feared sights during the original Scourge invasions, where roving packs hunted down and disabled human civilian ships fleeing from the Cradle Worlds for later boarding and crew capture for parasite implantation.



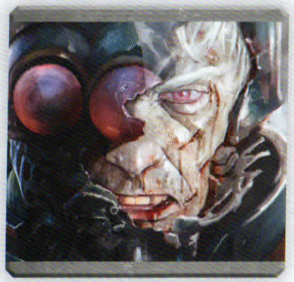
Torpedoes: Scourge torpedoes differ from human equivalents in that they feature an insidious biological component. Slightly smaller than a standard UCM munition, these still massive weapons include a compliment of several hundred Razorworms suspended in noxious fluid towards the rear of the torpedo. The front section does the job of blasting a hole in the enemy ship, while the Razorworms are then disgorged into the opened superstructure of the target vessel. Over the course of the battle, those Razorworms that survived the impact proceed to wreak havoc aboard, targeting vital systems and crew in a frenzy of slaughter that can only end in the demise of the target vessel.

Dropships: Much like their human equivalents, Scourge dropships require deployment direct into atmosphere by strike carrier insertion. The most common types employed are the Despoiler, Harbinger, Marauder and Intruder. These dropships usually transfer armoured units such as tanks and mechanised infantry at the spearhead of an assault. Unlike mankind's dropships though, Scourge craft are one-way anti-grav constructs that cannot return to their strike carrier under their own power when the mission is over. Once committed to a full invasion, the philosophy is always and without question permanent conquest or death.

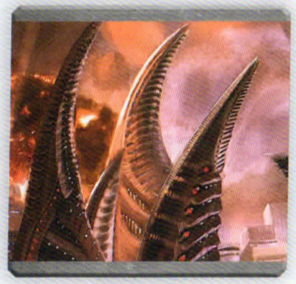
Bulk Landers: Scourge bulk landers are always a feared sight, especially for a civilian population, since each one can unload many hundreds of Scourge warriors intent on capture and assimilation. The Doombringer is the most recognisable type, a distinctive craft whose silhouette has been etched in the nightmares of the human race. Doombringers are also capable of deploying some of the largest ground constructs the Scourge has in its arsenal including fearsome defence batteries. Scourge bulk landers are fully void-capable and are usually deployed by Scourge Troopships.

GROUND ASSETS

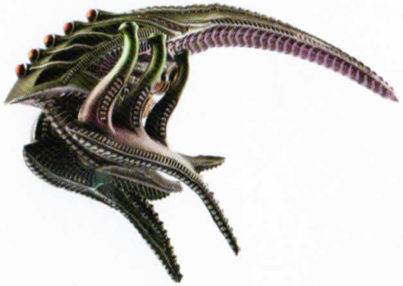
Armoured Formations: Scourge grav-tanks and walkers are formidable opponents on the battlefield. Each 'piloted' by a pure Scourge parasite, grafted to the construct for life, they are disturbingly lithe fusions of life and machine. They are normally brought to the battlefield by Scourge dropships, delivered to atmosphere by Gargoyle class strike carriers.

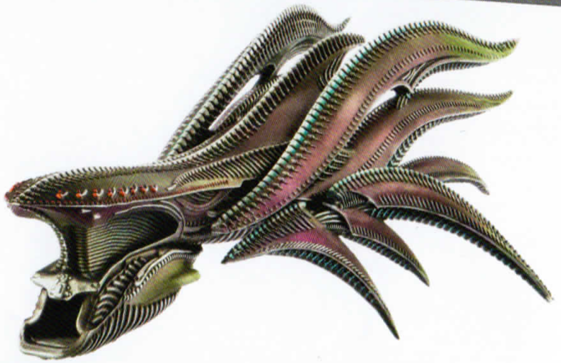


Infantry Formations: Scourge infantry are a true horror for humans to face in battle as the vast majority of them inhabit human hosts – once free citizens of the Cradle Worlds turned to slaughter their former brethren. These are accompanied by other even more dangerous nightmares such as the monstrous Destroyers and the insidious Razorworms, a lethal alien species similarly turned to the will of the Scourge race. While they can be deployed by dropships, vast swarms of infantry are more likely to be deployed by Troopships and bulk landers.



Defence Batteries: Much like their human equivalent, Scourge bulk landers can also be called upon to deploy ground assets too large for dropships. The most common of these are defence batteries, allowing the Scourge to defend their stolen territory from enemy landing forces and to quickly reinforce threatened areas of the battlespace.

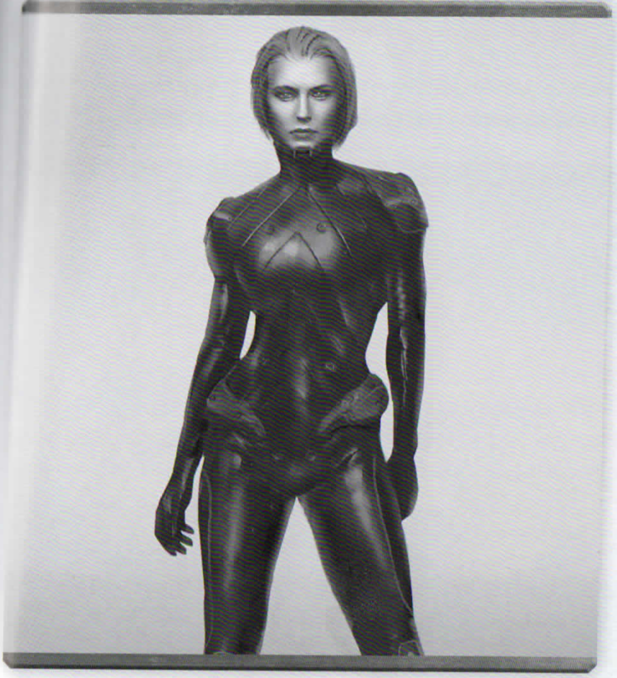




THE POST-HUMAN REPUBLIC

A tiny portion of humanity turned its back on mankind in the waning days of the last Golden Age. Over one and a half centuries later, the PHR has emerged from the shadows as an unrecognisable civilisation, its people irrevocably changed. They are no longer simple human beings, they are post-humans – cyborgs.

A society no more than three billion strong, the PHR is a nation of elites, each individual more than a match for several lesser mortals. With remarkable speed, they have made technological advancements surpassing those of the UCM. Since its fiery birth, the PHR has been guided by the enigmatic White Sphere, a mysterious object of immense power. It is treated by the people of the PHR with a reverence bordering on worship.



BIRTH

The Post Human Republic was born in the waning days of mankind's Golden Age through the intervention of the mysterious alien AI, the White Sphere. Those desperate souls that chose to believe in and heed the Warning of invasion it foretold chartered, stole or initiated mutiny aboard thousands of starships, causing deep divisions in society. Those vessels able to break through planetary blockades and reach jump points translated through foldspace to Vega IV, an area of space the Sphere indicated as an assembly point for all those that wished to follow it.

Their escape from the ruling government's fleet sent to bring them to heel in the infamous Battle of Vega was made possible by firing on their pursuers, critically weakening mankind's fleet on the eve of the Scourge invasion. That the PHR began with fratricide and betrayal was, they argue, a sad necessity, regretted but not atoned for. From its very outset, this group would be forever ostracised and removed from the rest of humanity, first ideologically and then physically.

EMERGENCE AND INTERVENTION

Beyond the Battle of Vega, the fate of those who escaped remained a mystery until the eve of the UCM's ambitious Reconquest campaign. A strange and unlooked for ship suddenly appeared over the UCM capital of Aurum, and within, a delegation from the self declared Post-Human Republic. This mystifyingly changed yet humanlike group, entered an audience with the UCM High Council, and avowed their nature as descendants of the Abandonist movement as well as being technologically altered to a higher state of being.

Early relations with the UCM were understandably soured by the actions of the Republic's forefathers. In this well documented meeting, the PHR delegation refused to show remorse for their actions in the Battle of Vega, only sorrow at the extensive loss of life. The PHR has always considered those actions necessary and hails the men and women who made them as heroes of the Republic.

Since no accord could be found between the two states and the PHR's advice against the Reconquest was ignored, the Republic has been conducting many varied operations in every theatre of the conflict. These include surface raids on specific and unknown targets, interdiction and disruption strikes and even a full scale conquest of the Tlalocan Moons Cradle World system. What their goals are in these interventions is unknown, but as their involvement in the war escalates, it must surely be only a matter of time before they become clear. Many UCM analysts state that the nature of these goals will have huge bearing on the future of mankind, suspecting that the Republic's intentions may be pivotal to the outcome of the Reconquest, and perhaps much more.

Citizens of the Republic have nearly as many reasons to despise the Scourge as those in UCM. While they were spared the horrors of the Scourge invasion, they were still forced to abandon their homes due to events set in motion by the hated aliens. Tales of Earth are almost as commonplace in the PHR as in the UCM, a fact often forgotten by those who claim the Republic cares little for future of the cradle of mankind. Despite this, there is little common ground between the two halves of humanity. With PHR fleets emerging from the blackness of space and attacking UCM vessels without warning, many Colonial captains will happily open fire on PHR ships with the slightest provocation, possessing an understandable hatred for such traitors to the species.

In many ways, the Republic has proven itself master of subterfuge, espionage and concealment. The level of PHR intelligence gathering capability is in all likelihood far in excess of the UCM, with evidence of foreknowledge in the movements of other factions being widespread. Agents of the Republic have been known to turn Resistance groups on the Cradle Worlds towards their own purposes, even on occasion against the UCM. Their relations with the Shaltari thus far are incomprehensibly complex and likely Machiavellian, with limited alliances between the two scheming factions forming and breaking like waves on a beach. The PHR is also highly adept at keeping its own secrets and despite some recent intel, it is a troubling fact that mankind knows far less of the Republic than it does of the Shaltari.

HOME SOIL

Where the White Sphere led the seed population of the PHR after the Battle of Vega is a complete enigma. Ambassadors have talked in guarded language of 'home soil', implying that the Republic occupies at least one planet. However, all attempts to determine locations or details have so far failed.

Many assume that these worlds are at least of equal quality to the Cradle Worlds or even Earth itself, since the White Sphere has demonstrated remarkable insight. Talk of utopian planets of unrivalled beauty and utility is common, although such speculation is considered dangerously distracting to the weighty task of Reconquest. However, a number of initiatives to find these worlds through the Office of Naval Intelligence are underway, with success predicted within the year given several recent breakthroughs in technology.

THE WHITE SPHERE

The few certainties about this enigmatic object's physical nature can be found in the rare, antique EAA Science Division records fortunate enough to have survived the Scourge invasion. Physically, it is known to be flawlessly white, apparently metallic, and about the size of a tennis ball. Its weight is staggering for its size, requiring the strength of two men to lift it. This crude summary represents the extent of UCM intelligence. More detailed records may await discovery on Earth and the Cradle Worlds, should the Reconquest succeed.

Its technological powers are undoubtedly tremendous. Tales of the days before the coming of the Scourge recount how it was able to decode and defeat the firewalls of every computer system on an entire sub-continent in a matter of seconds. From this, it has been theorised that the Sphere utilised the vast bandwidth it had unlocked to download inconceivable amounts of intelligence. Many surmise that with every computer in South America in its grip, it would have been able to tap into humanity's listening posts. Perhaps it saw something there that mankind missed. Others point out the all too coincidental timing of its arrival, asserting that it was planted on Earth to sow fear, division and uncertainty, softening up mankind's defences. Others theorise that had all of mankind heeded The Warning it would be in a very different and elevated state today. However, this sentiment is kept within isolated circles, since such comments border on treason within the UCM.

Today, the White Sphere is apparently central to the entire ethos of the Republic. Initially, it appeared that it commanded the Republic directly. However, new evidence suggests that it can only give advice, and that direct orders must be issued by those elected to interpret its council. The world 'Republic' should have indicated a democratic system from the outset of course, although the choice of language utilised by ambassadors certainly indicated subservience.

Either way, the White Sphere occupies a revered and crucial position in the Republic, determining many of its policies. It is almost certain that a good measure of the PHR's evident technological superiority can be attributed to the Sphere's apparently benevolent influence. The Republic has morphed from a desperate collection of mutineers and refugees into an unrecognisable society in less than 170 years, a feat only attainable with considerable assistance. The question of motive is obvious, but theories here are too wild to justify putting down in record. For now, the White Sphere remains the greatest enigma to trouble the UCM.

POST-HUMANS

From the earliest encounters with citizens of the Republic, their 'changed' nature was instantly noticeable. While clearly human, their appearance, speech, movements and mannerisms were somehow uncanny and certainly disquieting. Their claim to being more than simply human was never in doubt from the moment it was voiced. An immediate visual sign of this change was the occasional flash of silver from below the skin of some individuals. On closer inspection, their complexions were all too perfect and their eyes more piercing than the average person, often in hues seldom seen in nature.

Most citizens exhibit extensive use of cybernetic prosthetics and modification, both for the purposes of injury repair and for improved physical performance. These artificial additions vary from simple bone and limb replacements to incomprehensibly advanced bio-artificial melding of living tissue and fabricated nanostructures.

However repugnant this sounds, subjects are usually at the height of physical perfection, despite the aforementioned gnawing feelings of 'difference' engendered to all who look upon them. Most UCM citizens who have witnessed them in person regard them as abhorrent and unnatural, a virtually distinct species to their own.

Whilst no two individuals present identical levels of enhancements, it is obvious that each derive substantial benefit from them. Subjects have demonstrated improved mental aptitude and endurance, increased speed, agility and strength coupled with superior vision. While grievous wounds are just as fatal to them as to ordinary humans, merely debilitating injuries are seemingly ignored with impetuous ease, indicating a conscious control of the pain response.

They are also in close communion with their technology, commanding total control with the lightest gesture and often with no perceptible input whatsoever. A deep empathy is also observed with others of their kind; a connection resembling the psychic at close distances. This is unmistakably electromagnetic in nature, as such abilities fail in EM shielded test chambers.

THE BINDING

The integration of these diverse artificial systems requires a complex web of connections to both each other and the organic systems of the patient. This is achieved through a network of advanced nanomachines binding to relevant biological aspects of the subject, the first stage in abandoning basic humanity. This process is known to the people of the PHR as 'The Binding', and appears to have the additional significance of an initiation right or coming of age. Although a period of several days of inebriation follows, the process is understood to be quite painless.

Only those who are 'Bound' are regarded as full citizens, and from that time on are known as 'post-humans'. They can then explore the multitudes of artificial enhancements available to PHR citizens, working on their bodies as an engineer might tinker with a race car. This is known to be a deeply personal process, with each modification selected by the user and apparently never forced on them. However, certain enhancements are present in every fighting PHR soldier, indicating that some are mandatory for military service. Differences between naval crews and ground troops have also emerged, suggesting that individuals choose or require enhancements to suit their vocation.

FAMILIARS

Most post-humans are augmented with a sophisticated neural-linked communications suite, so they can commune with artificial intelligences known as Familiars. These devices take a wide variety of forms, from small domestic robots to personal transports and are central to the operation of the entire PHR. Developing affinity to them is considered a vital skill which can only be learned through years of practice. The most accomplished practitioners can communicate with dozens of such AI's simultaneously, massively enhancing their own potency.

There are even tales of spectacularly gifted individuals controlling whole swarms of drones and nanomachines, often to deadly effect on the battlefield. Such creatures are almost legendary, with the rare Medusa being the most feared and well documented by UCM ground forces. In the void, individuals of such potency would surely be a powerful presence, perhaps able to direct the artificial intelligences of an entire ship with pure mental agility.

ELITE ARMIES

The population of the PHR is estimated to be less than one sixth of that of the UCM. In order to be effective as a fighting force, the PHR concentrates on maximising the survivability and lethality of every unit, providing a matchless quality of training and equipment.

With superior technology and artificial enhancements at its disposal, the Republic has proven highly successful in this field.Almost always outnumbered, PHR forces have repeatedly demonstrated that they can hold their own against terrible odds. Man for man, the UCMA is no match for the Republic's finest.

The leadership structure follows a similar chain of command and force organisation to UCM counterparts, since each share a common heritage. Terms such as 'Division', 'Battalion' and 'Squad' are in regular use with the PHR, although it seems certain that no military formations exist which are as vast as the Colonial Legions.

THE GRAND FLEET

The Post Human Republic's Grand Fleet is a powerful force to be reckoned with, but most likely significantly smaller than those of the UCM and the Scourge. What this elite organisation lacks in numbers it more than makes up for in sheer quality, both in crew and equipment.

In the early days of the Reconquest, the PHR's fleet was thought to be tiny, with the name 'Grand Fleet' conjuring an array of jokes among the most arrogant of the UCM's Admiralty staff. However, the Republic's actions in recent months have forced senior analysts to revaluate and to conclude that it is far larger than first thought. Most notably, their stunning conquest of the Tlalocan Moons illustrates their potential for capturing and holding an entire Cradle World system, although very few are currently privy to this information, such is its alarming potential.

This has led to further speculation about their motives, as with a powerful fleet large enough to pose a serious threat they seem to have restricted their actions against the UCM to localised affairs. Ultimately, it's too early to discern the PHR's aims at this stage, although a number of operations and initiatives are currently underway in an attempt to rectify this woeful lack of intel.

Actual estimations of numbers of ships vary hugely to the point of being meaningless. The essential problem lies with the unknown numbers of ships the Republic may have in reserve around their mysterious homeworld/s. While it's a fairly safe assumption that most Scourge ships in existence are currently in theatre due to the lack of new reinforcements in desperate situations, the same cannot be said for the PHR. Their motives are clearly as different as their modes of fighting and the PHR have not yet been called upon to mount a major defence of their own territory. It's equally possible that the UCM has witnessed almost all PHR fleet assets in play already or that the Republic is holding vast numbers of ships back. Finding and observing the PHR's homeworld/s is an Office of Naval Intelligence primary objective behind only the discovery of the Scourge ones.

What is certain is that PHR fleets are highly advanced to a level well above that of the UCM although they follow similar organisational structures. While only the ships assembled at the Tlalocan moons were equivalent to a standard UCM Battlefleet in numbers, taskforce sized fleets have been observed in other systems, such as Elysium and more recently Shangri-La.

Small and focused fleet elements are also routinely observed operating far from any significant formations, illustrating the post human's abilities to perform effectively far from reinforcements or support, often for months at a time. Indeed, many PHR ship classes are designed with such operations in mind, with the assumption that they will be outnumbered and thus should be multi-role, flexible and above all, tough.

PHR STRATEGIES

An Elite Force: Every single PHR sailor and ship can be considered an elite and advanced asset when compared to the UCM. Most PHR battle plans seem to take this into account, as being outnumbered does not seem to concern their admirals overmuch. Indeed, the broadside weapons configurations common in PHR ships allow maximum efficiency in firepower when surrounded on both sides, giving them virtually twice the firepower of a UCM equivalent in the same situation. In combination with this, the competency of their crews and leadership cannot be denied, with almost every action observed so far being conducted with consummate skill and with few miss-steps for an opponent to exploit. Such quality is essential though, as any lapse could see these usually small forces wiped from the map by a numerically superior foe.

Mission-Focused Fleets: Despite their often confusing and bewildering actions in the war so far, it is clear that the PHR have some very specific goals in mind. Their attacks are highly focused, targeted and well drilled, with fleets specially configured for the task. These missions vary wildly from supply disruption to all-out invasion but are always deliberate and methodical. This makes PHR fleet composition an ever changing and fluid thing, as elements are moved freely to where they are needed, seldom staying together for any length of time but shifting to the dictates of the mission. It seems increasingly likely that every action the Republic has taken thus far is part of a carefully conceived and deviously complex plan, with each small act contributing to a currently unknowable goal.

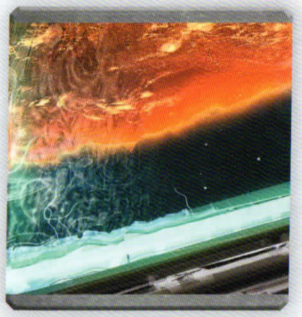
Disruptive Operations: By far the most common type of action undertaken by the PHR to date is the disruptive attack. The aim of such a mission seems to be the steering of an enemy through the interference, misdirection or distraction. With such acts as destroying supply convoys, crippling key ships, attacking the rearguard or sabotaging force assemblage, the Republic has been affecting the war on a disproportionate level to the actual number of ships utilised. Whether this is by design or necessity due to low numbers, only time will tell.

Targeted Surface Assaults: Another frequent type of PHR attack involves the selective and targeted assault of a particular surface target, usually by strike carrier but increasingly by troopship, as the scale of such attacks is on the rise. In particular, the Republic's wide ranging and focused landings on Shangri-La have exemplified this kind of operation. Conquest does not seem to be the goal as the forces committed are too localised and too small. In any case, Republic ground forces have sometimes been observed extracting efficiently mere days after making planetfall, their mysterious objective/s most likely achieved. As the frequency of such raids is on the rise, UCM commanders have been instructed to remain vigilant for enemy incursions at any time and in any place, as frequently these attacks are against seemingly random areas of little apparent strategic importance.

Dynamic Design: The PHR is a vigorous and constantly evolving society based on meteoric technological progress. Its people have had to adapt to a blistering pace of change and advancement over the previous decades, a rate of improvement that shows no signs of abating. This nature has obvious ramifications for naval development as new and ever more lethal designs reach the battlefields of the 27th Century with alarming frequency. It is most likely that the oldest PHR vessel currently in service is only a few decades old and has probably undergone several refits and upgrades in its short life. Such progress leads to an ever changing threat landscape for all those who would face the Republic's Grand Fleet in battle.

SHIPS

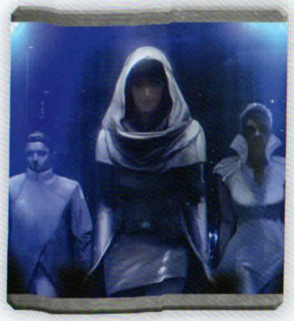
Armour: All PHR vessels are protected by layers of skilfully conceived and elaborately constructed armour, mostly of non-metallic and highly advanced composites. Unlike UCM ships, most of this armour is concentrated on the skin of the vessel, since its design is so effective as to render many layers of internal armour unnecessary. This frees up space for internally mounted broadside weapons and the advanced systems necessary to keep such wonders of naval craft operational. Much like UCMF ships, the most crucial systems such as CIC, drive cores and reactors are still buried deep within the superstructure, as even the internal frameworks of PHR vessels are tough enough to be considered armour by UCM standards.



Internal Atmospheric Field Technology: While UCM ships rely on physical compartments to seal off sections in the event of a hull breach, PHR ships feature advanced systems that shield undamaged internals from the void with fields alone. This allows sprawling, interconnected corridors, vast, cathedral-like internal spaces and open hangars that would be considered foolish for a warship in the UCMF. Indeed, this technology allows flight decks to be visually open to the void when the physical doors are open and enables crew to work unsuited, their breathable air contained by such fields. As a result, PHR ship interiors are considerably more elegant and far less oppressive than UCM ones without the need for confined compartments and oppressive blast doors around every corner.

Crew: Even the lowliest citizen of the Republic has been augmented with a range of technologies that makes their baseline potential ahead of that of an unenhanced human. It seems that this is coupled with neuro-implanted theoretical training regimes and actual physical training far in advance of anything the UCM can afford to provide its crews with. Since the ships themselves are highly advanced and automated well beyond UCMF levels, it is possible for PHR ships to have relatively small crews. This makes the PHR's inferior manpower far less of a factor, leading the most pessimistic to conclude that their fleet strength could be every bit the equal of the UCMF despite the Republic's far smaller projected population.

CIC: As in UCM ships, The Combat Information Centre (also known as the Operations Room or Bridge) is the heart of every ship and houses its captain, senior officers and support staff. It is from here that actions of the vessel are directed and decisions made but that is where the similarity with a Colonial CIC ends. A PHR bridge is a place of apparent serenity, with no screens - a stark contrast to the visually arresting and achingly complex information overload many detest on a UCM bridge. All of a PHR ship's senior crew are hardwired into the ships network directly, controlling the ship in a concert of interconnected minds without physically moving a muscle. The command staff's immersion into the senses of the vessel must, UCM scientists consider, be a supremely perfect way to appreciate every nuisance of a ship in combat and to perceive and react to any threat or opportunity with speed and precision.



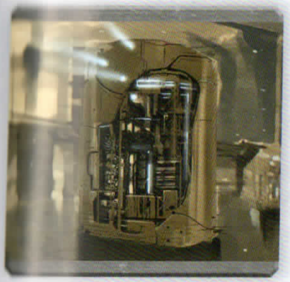
Command Crew: When interfaced with the vessel's core network, the command crew ARE the brain of the ship in a very real sense. These individuals are most often those that have demonstrated the greatest affinity for their enhancements and are more frequently women than men, since as with the elite Siren corps on the ground, they seem to present the most extreme levels of mental integration with PHR neurotech. However, such requirements are not quite as stringent as with the Siren corps, allowing a mix of male and female command crew. Of course, sheer merit and the unteachable instincts of a true ship's captain always reign supreme over any amount of technological enhancement and most would be exceptional individuals even without their cybernetics.

Scanners and Comms: As with all naval warfare going back to the very first conflict on the high seas, the detection and accurate targeting of the enemy is essential to victory. The PHR have a high level mastery in this, and feature some of the most advanced sensor suites yet encountered by the UCM, bested only by those of the Shaltari. These systems allow PHR ships to target and accurately engage enemy vessels at greater ranges than their UCM equivalents, giving them an almost universal edge in combat. These systems are also highly efficient and interface directly with the consciousness of the ship's command crew – they are the eyes, ears and touch of the ship.

Power Cores: All PHR vessels are powered by at least one fusion-based power core, providing an almost inexhaustible supply of clean energy for its ship's ever demanding systems. Typically, there are dozens of small cores spread throughout the deepest internals of a vessel, in contrast to the small numbers of large ones on UCM ships. This, coupled with a certain level of redundancy enhances the resilience of PHR ships as the loss of a single core will not overly affect the vessel's functions. This is possible through a higher technological prowess than the UCM – further miniaturisation of such generators can be seen a crucial step to reaching the heights of mastery that that Shaltari have attained.

Artificial Gravity Generators and Inertial Dampers: Post-humans seem to be far more at home with working in zero-g environments than unaugmented humans and indeed many interior sections are designed for zero-g use. The crew seamlessly transition from earth-normal to other gravitational states with the contemptuous ease and confidence only exhibited by the lifelong inhabitants of Niccolum's orbitals in the Colonies. Control of gravity aboard ship is just as important as with vessels of the UCM though, especially during combat where such technology is essential to prevent blackout, voiding of the bowels and loss of motive ability in all but the gentlest of manoeuvres. PHR ships feature a range of systems designed to nullify and control gravity much as on UCM vessels, just in a more advanced, compact and flexible way.

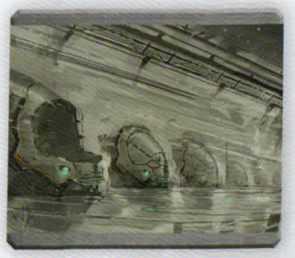
Gravity Nullifiers: PHR vessels feature far more advanced gravity nullification systems than UCM ones, although they work in the same way and fulfil the same purpose of negating a planet's gravity, allowing geosynchronous orbit regardless of speed or altitude. The advanced nature of the PHR systems is most telling in loiter time as the problem of heat build-up is much reduced. Their ships can therefore stay on station above a planet for twice as long as UCM equivalents before they must retreat to deeper space or attain conventional orbital velocity to allow the systems to cool down.



Foldspace Drives: PHR foldspace drives are on an entirely different technological level to both Scourge and UCM ones. Most crucially, this allows them to jump to any location (beyond gravity well thresholds) without a node and with pinpoint accuracy. The removal of this limitation is profound and makes PHR fleets exponentially more dangerous as they only need to know the coordinates of a target to be able to jump to it, making them utterly unpredictable. It is believed that this is one of the first technological boons provided by the mysterious White Sphere and that the freedom it must have afforded the PHR's pioneers allowed them to grow into the formidable force they are today despite a modest initial population.

Sublight Engines: All ships require sublight drives to manoeuvre and reposition and the vessels of the Republic are no exception. These drives provide the motive power to accelerate and decelerate ships in combat, although their thrust vectoring is limited when compared to UCM ships. Instead, PHR vessels use a combination of varied thrust between multiple engines and manoeuvre fins to steer.

Manoeuvre Fins: PHR ships employ an elegant system of moving fin-like structures in order to steer in a planet's gravity well. These do so by locally altering gravity and are somewhat similar to those on Scourge ships in concept although they look and function quite differently. Occasionally, sublight engines will be mounted on the fin itself, granting the fin's movements additional significance when the ship is conducting extreme manoeuvres. Most of a PHR vessel's gravity nullifiers are also integrated into these fins and indeed many systems serve both functions.



Escape Pods: All PHR ships feature lifepod capacity of at least twice their crew compliment, UCM naval analysts estimate. This exceeds the standard practices of the UCMF and highlights the importance the Republic places on lives, although it must be said that the efficiency and reduced size of most PHR systems affords the luxury of space aboard ship that the UCM does not have for such redundancies. What sets PHR pods apart from those of the UCM is that they are designed to head AWAY from a planet's gravity well, where they can be efficiently collected and expeditiously jumped to safety by PHR rescue ships. Such a design is essential, as PHR planners must have anticipated that they would almost always be operating over enemy territory that they have no intention of holding, rather than their own.

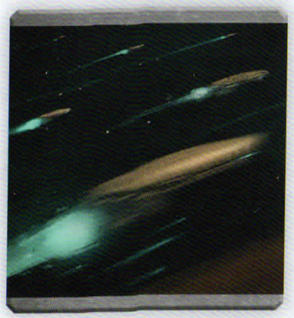
SHIP-BORNE WEAPONS

Mass Drivers: These are the standard ship-ship weapons in service with the Grand Fleet. Their principle is the same as with UCM ones, using magnetism to propel a solid projectile at spectacular speeds, conveying vast amounts of destructive energy to the target. However, they are more efficient and require shorter barrel lengths to attain the same energies. This, coupled with the greater available interior space on PHR ships allows them to be mounted in broadside configuration, an efficient setup for packing in the maximum number of guns at the expense of available fire arcs. Indeed, the mass broadside is something of a signature in PHR fleets. The Grand Fleet also utilises a range of calibres specifically designed to be more effective against certain classes of ship, the largest being engineered to be especially devastating against the heaviest enemy vessels.

Anti-Ship Lasers: The PHR make frequent use of directed energy weapons and appear to have mastered them. They are integrated into a ship's prow, giving them a limited firing arc. These weapons unleash a sustained burn of energy, cutting deep into a ship's hull to get at the core systems. A useful side effect of the vast energies involved is that the target ship's hull is heated to enormous temperatures, highlighting it for the targeting scanners of other ships. PHR lasers are generally more efficient and smaller than their Colonial equivalents and are occasionally mounted in pairs. However, unlike on UCM ships they are usually the supplementary, rather than primary armament.

Orbital Bombardment Cannon: The Grand Fleet's targeted surface attacks and precision ground operations frequently require a preparatory phase of orbital bombardment. Unlike UCM attacks, this is often short and precise, maintaining the element of surprise and localising the devastation. These weapons are a variant of mass drivers in PHR ships, although their muzzle velocity is comparatively low. What makes them so devastating is the size and mass of their projectiles, with gravity assisting them in their ominous descent to the target. They unusually take the place of some of a ship's broadside capability and are frequently mounted on the same ships that will ultimately launch the Republic's ground forces.

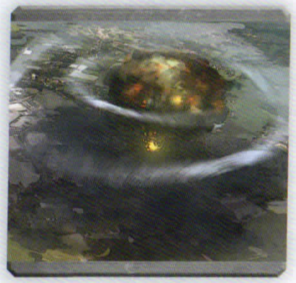
Dark Matter Cannon: This is one of the largest starship mounted weapons yet encountered by the UCM and has currently only been observed at the prow of the dreaded Heracles class battleship. This exotic weapon's physics is still largely unknown to UCM scientists, although its horrific effects are well documented. Certainly, a single hit from this weapon can be enough to rip a cruiser in half in a coruscating ringed detonation of eldritch fire. A side effect of this discharge is to disrupt and overload a ship's core systems which would normally only be at risk in a desperately crippled vessel.



Drones: This is a catch all term for standard PHR close action weapons in naval circles. These munitions are essentially more advanced versions of standard missiles, featuring an intelligent but limited AI core designed to dodge and weave around enemy point defence, as well as seek out vulnerable spots in the target's hull. As a result, far fewer systems need be mounted to achieve the same result, and thus they are far less wasteful. They are also somewhat larger than UCM types and carry a greater explosive payload.

Neutron Missiles: These highly advanced weapons are a rare variant of regular PHR drones, presumably fiendishly difficult to produce and thus only encountered on a select few ships. These weapons utilise a tiny but unbelievably dense quantity of neutronium, a compressed mass of pure neutrons contained at its tip. These munitions must be self propelled over several minutes of sustained burn as the core is simply too dense to be accelerated quickly by something like a mass driver or cannon. On impact, the sheer density coupled with tiny size of the core allows it to punch clean through an entire ship – even a battleship. While the actual physical damage inflicted is not usually catastrophic, these weapons can touch vulnerable core systems on their way through, causing crippling damage.

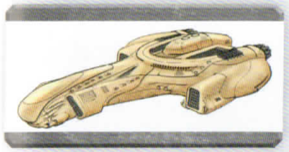
Point Defence Panels: The hulls of all PHR warships feature an internally concealed network of sub-surface point defence lasers, emitted through tiny, unobtrusive panels flush with the skin of the ship. While they can't be seen from the outside, they are highly effective at destroying enemy munitions and strike craft. While less powerful than UCM versions, they are more numerous, leading to an equivalent effectiveness with a much lower power requirement.



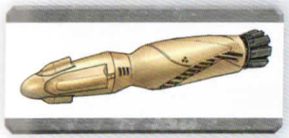
Nuclear Warheads: Although no use of nuclear weapons by PHR forces has yet been documented in this war, it must be assumed that at least capital ships carry a compliment of warheads, should the need arise. An enlightened society such as the Republic must surely regard their use as an act of desperation in all but the most specialised of circumstances. However, as the PHR's involvement in the conflict escalates, their first use of thermonuclear weapons must be on the horizon.

STRIKE CRAFT

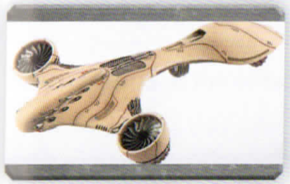
Fighters: The Grand Fleet's standard interceptor craft is the Arion fighter. Far larger than its atmospheric cousin the Athena, it has a crew of two is designed for close protection sorties of friendly ships against enemy bombers and close action munitions. It is also an excellent interceptor capable of engaging enemy fighters while protecting friendly bomber formations. Much like ground based PHR vehicles, the Arion's crew are wired into the craft directly through their neural enhancements, making them more responsive and aware of the its state than an ordinary pilot ever could be.



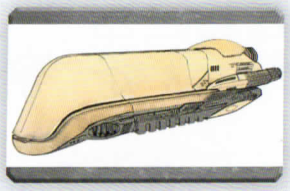
Bombers: The standard anti-ship strike craft employed by the Grand Fleet is the Aethon, a heavy bomber with a crew of three. These craft carry a range of heavy munitions designed to inflict crippling damage to starships when used en-mass. These surprisingly agile craft can fly long distances to a target, greatly increasing the striking range of their carrier. The munitions they deploy are extremely powerful to a level far in excess of their Colonial cousins.



Torpedoes:
Much like UCM types, PHR torpedoes such as the dreaded Nightfish are enormous self-propelled munitions far larger than regular missiles – bigger than some small starships in fact! The level of devastation such a weapon can inflict is extensive, famously to the point of tearing a cruiser in half from within. Compounding this lethality is the torpedoes' thick, composite armoured shell, making it immune to almost all countermeasures as it closes inevitably with the doomed target.



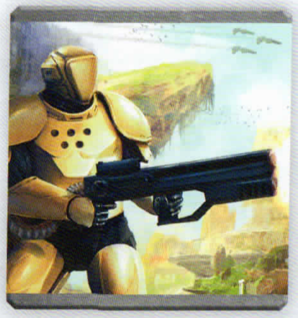
Dropships:
These are atmospheric aircraft designed to deliver vehicles and mechanised infantry to combat hot zones. The most common types operated by the Republic are the Poseidon, Njord, Neptune and Triton. They are well armoured, agile and small, making them suitable for first wave assaults against hardened targets. They are normally delivered to the battlefield by strike carriers since these vessels are atmospheric-capable. Most infamously, these small craft are the primary means of planetfall for the PHR's rightly feared Battle Walkers.



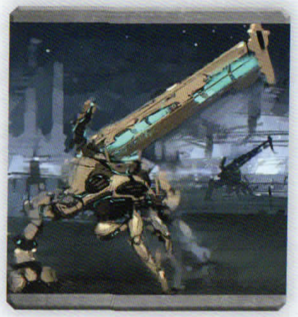
Bulk Landers: The PHR also employs bulk landers to deploy larger numbers of infantry in a far more efficient manner than dropships, the Pegasus being the most common type. Unlike the UCMA, it seems that the Republic's military machine is not primarily geared towards mass conquest and as a result these craft are used sparingly and when the mission dictates, although their appearance on the front is on the rise as the conflict escalates. The Pegasus can also carry the largest of PHR ground assets such as defence batteries and the almost mythical Type-6 and 7 Grand Walkers.

GROUND ASSETS

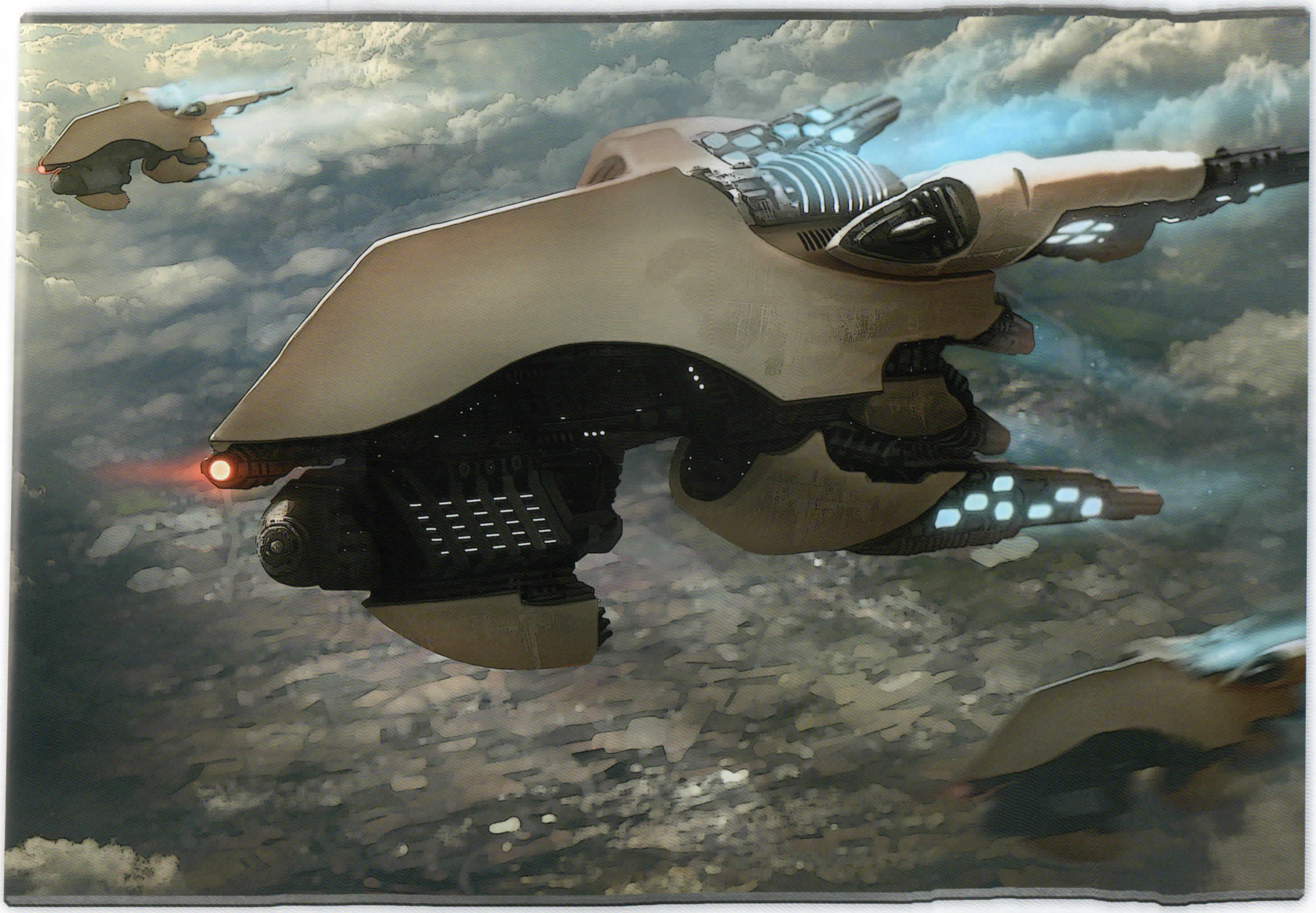
Armoured Formations: PHR armoured might is well documented. Already, accounts of vehicle wreckage crushed beneath the oncoming feet of Battle Walkers are legion. The Type 1-5 units most commonly encountered are delivered by dropship, including the awesome six-legged Hades and Nemesis constructs. Treaded vehicles such as the Juno and jetskimmers like the Aether are also part of the Republic's famous armoured spearhead. There are few positions which cannot be defended, captured or raised to the ground by these highly advanced and elite strike forces.

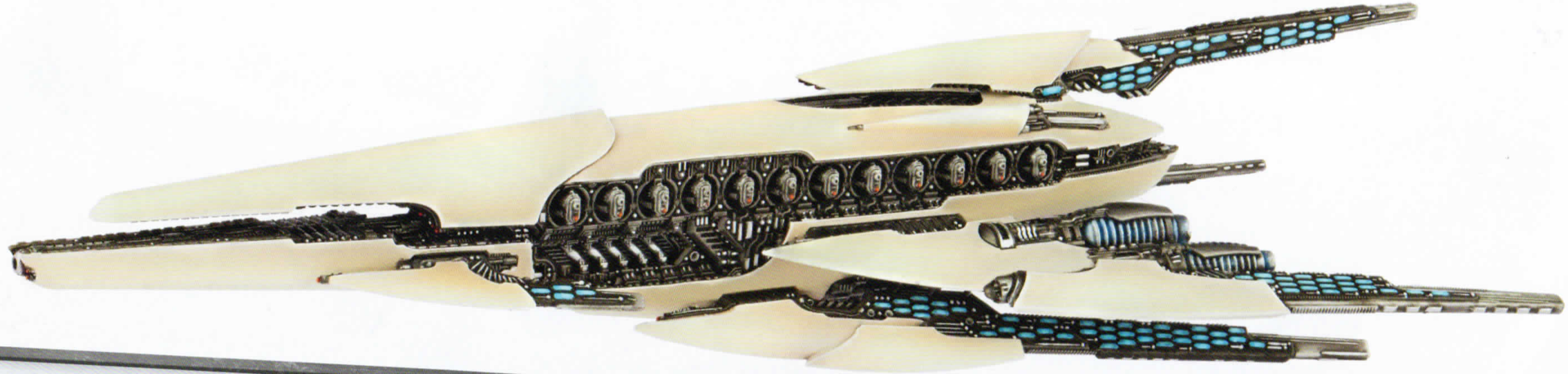


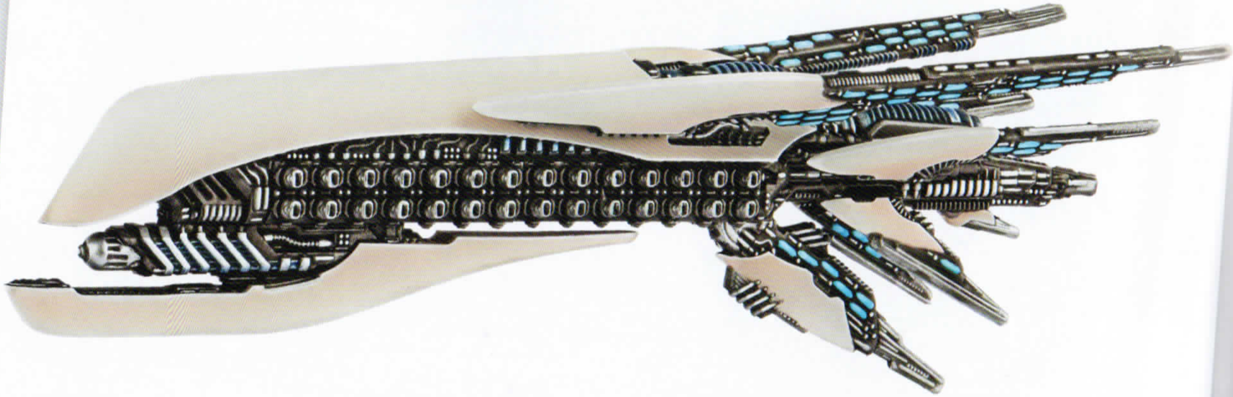
Infantry Formations: Every single PHR soldier on the frontline can be considered elite by Colonial standards. They have innate physical advantages granted to them by their augmentations coupled with superior training and equipment. The bulk of the Republic's infantry are the Immortals, armoured shock troops of excellent quality. Excepted estimations are that these forces are tiny when compared to the vast Colonial Legions, better suited to lighting raids and localised missions than full planetary conquest. However, events on the Tlalocan Moons are quickly dispelling that notion in the eyes of the few that are aware of the Republic's occupation there.



Defence Batteries: Pegasus bulk landers can also deploy defence batteries, massive nominally fixed emplacements designed to destroy incoming enemy dropships and bulk landers. These systems are highly effective and efficient, especially at annihilating waves of slower and more vulnerable targets. In some cases, these have been reported as being able to relocate under their own power, although this only has bearing strategically rather than tactically due to the slow pace of movement.







THE SHALTARI TRIBES

The Shaltari are an ancient and highly developed species. Their technology is advanced to a level of sophistication rivalled only by its potency. They have traversed the stars for millennia, learned myriad truths, and have fought countless wars. Through their knowledge, the Shaltari transcend even death itself, and can endure indefinitely, perceiving the ebb and flow of time like no other race.

In battle, the Shaltari are fearsome adversaries. Their swiftness is unmatched, their firepower unequalled, their bravery undeniable. The beauty of their ships belies their true nature; instruments of death, honed to lethal perfection long before humanity learned to throw stones. They are peerless masters of technology.

PHYSIOLOGY

Shaltari are diminutive in stature, standing a little over four feet high. They are roughly humanoid, although disproportionately long-limbed. They are covered from head to foot in long, thick spines, the colour of which can be changed at will. Waves of complex patterns can be broadcast at bewildering speed, a trait which has been likened to cuttlefish on Earth. Despite this, individuals present a 'dominant' colour for the majority of the time, believed to be linked to complex psychological conditions.

Shaltari have large, ovoid eyes. Unlike human eyes, these appear opaque blue and lack pupils. Despite this, their vision is broadly equivalent to that of humans. A Shaltari has no discernible nose or ears, although a small mouth is visible, lined with short, sharp teeth.

They move with an unnatural and disquieting grace, although they can be faster than humans when pressed. Each movement appears flawlessly coordinated and is always accomplished with precision and economy. In short, Shaltari normally seem in perfect control of their bodies, their physical actions reaching a level of exactitude unattainable even by mankind's premier martial artists.

THE ENDURING CONSCIOUSNESS

The natural life of a Shaltari is believed to exceed three centuries. Like all known lifeforms, biological mortality eventually sets in, bringing old age and death.This loss of education, expertise and experience was mourned deeply by the early Shaltari, a race which has always valued knowledge above all things. This sense of futile loss was eventually banished by their most important technological innovation – consciousness transfer.

Near mortal death, this advanced process allows the psyche and memories of the subject to be transferred into another physical body. Brain-dead 'shell' bodies are grown especially for this purpose, allowing the consciousness of the individual to endure beyond natural demise. This simple summary represents the limits of human understanding of this revered and enigmatic process.

In this manner, some Shaltari have 'lived' for millennia, progressing though dozens of bodies. These 'Elders' have vast levels of experience at their disposal, knowledge which enabled the Shaltari to expand technologically beyond the scope of all other known races.

An unfortunate (and probably inevitable) psychological side effect of this practice is that Shaltari develop an increasingly acute and pathological fear of death as the eons pass. The Shaltari have no known religion and view death as simply the end of existence. Having lived for millennia, the Elders are terrified of the final death above all things. This makes their actions in battle quite remarkable and is a testament to their bravery in defeating this phobia.

The 'default' colour of a Shaltari seems to be a good indicator of the age of the consciousness. In general terms, the older the psyche, the paler their spines become. Young Shaltari are invariably dark in colour, while ancient Elders are white or even translucent. This colouration apparently has nothing to do with the physical age of the body, and is rather a reflection of the knowledge and experience of the individual. This trait is believed to be key to determining hierarchy in a race where learning is held in the highest esteem, as may have been the case since the earliest days of Shaltari evolution.

FIRSTBORNS

Although seemingly androgynous, there are Shaltari males and females, although they reproduce incredibly slowly. The time between conception and birth is believed to span beyond 20 years. This sluggish pace of reproduction reduced Shaltari expansion to a crawl in their early days of galactic exploration.

With the introduction of consciousness transfer, death due to old age was banished into history, and numbers increased at an appreciable rate. Despite this, the population is still relatively small and slow to expand, highlighting one of the few true weaknesses of the species as a force in the Galaxy.

Death from other causes can of course still occur, and as such, the population requires replenishment, with new personalities bringing fresh ideas into a society otherwise in danger of stagnating. These newborn Shaltari are known as Firstborns. Once they have reached adulthood, they enter public life firmly at the bottom of the social ladder, with everything to prove and little to lose.

WARRIOR VENERATION

In current times, the most common way for a Shaltari to meet death is in battle. To the human psyche, it would seem logical that participation in war would be desperately avoided by such a race. This could not be further from the truth, due to the central tenet in Shaltari culture – Warrior Veneration.

While the Shaltari value knowledge above all else, they respect martial endeavour beyond all other undertakings. The Shaltari have had to fight for their existence countless times over millennia as starfarers. As such, their veneration for warriors has reached a zenith unequalled by the younger races.

This deep reverence has resulted in a dominant warlike subculture within Shaltari society. This is a clear two-tier structure where those who have never seen battle cannot even be bestowed with a name. The Shaltari believe that this basic level of respect can only be achieved by fighting for the race. This attitude has extended to dealings with humans, where Shaltari ambassadors refuse to speak to or address by name those without military experience. The Shaltari abhor the use of drones and hold those who suggest their use as dishonourable, beneath contempt. Physically taking to the battlefield, be it in space or on land, has always been held as the pinnacle of taking one's place in society.

Firstborn Shaltari almost always join the military, where they can earn the respect of their peers and subsequently advance in the hierarchy. They make up the bulk of ground infantry, where mortality rates are at their highest. Firstborns have everything to prove and do not yet fear death. They are fiery and remorseless warriors. Firstborns in Shaltari fleets are usually posted on smaller and aggressively-oriented ships, with places on larger vessels of consequence reserved for more senior figures.

Older individuals often remain in the military and regularly take to the battlefield. Many simply cannot stomach the adjustment to civilian life, and yearn for the chaos and symphony of battle. It is believed that a powerful, warlike nature is deeply engrained in Shaltari instincts, a fact which may go some way towards explaining their ferociousness in combat.

Fighting Elders are rare, and inevitably fulfil command roles. Those that have remained in the military for centuries (and even millennia) are clearly those born for nothing but war. They are peerless commanders, experienced to a level unfathomable to humans. Their mere survival illustrates that they have tasted victory countless times and have seldom known defeat. Captains of Shaltari capital ships are almost always this kind of formidable individual, a fact that all UCM naval officers in training are never allowed to forget.

THE TRIBES

Over time, the Shaltari have come to embrace the concept of strength through diversity, struggle and competition. Since they are accustomed to being the most advanced and powerful race in their spheres of influence, the only logical source for such contest has been with each other.

Throughout the ages, differences of opinion and various cultural nuances have developed between disparate groups, resulting in clear divisions within Shaltari society. These divisions are appreciated and indeed lauded by all Shaltari as a driving force for development, invention and improvement against stagnation.

These groups exhibit varying degrees of separation, and are characterised chiefly by their attitudes and culture. Individuals are often known to gravitate towards a group with similar opinions to their own, ensuring a constantly shifting genetic mix.

These differences have often led to disagreements, and occasionally open war between various groups. Battles are often kept small scale in nature, and are pursued only until honour is satisfied. Such 'Honour Feuds' are respected and even praised by Shaltari as necessary for the maintenance and furthering of strength. This is because they know of no greater opponents than themselves.

Humans have come to refer to these distinct blocks as 'Tribes', a simple term used by early Shaltari ambassadors. Tribes were assigned designations corresponding to early indigenous Earth nations and cultures, a practice continued by the UCM. These are normally allocated randomly and do not indicate any similarity between the Tribe and its original namesake. Ancient names such as Apache, Inuit, Amazon and Inca are in common usage once again, although now with very different connotations.

In addition, recent developments and observations have concluded that greater Shaltari power blocks are emerging, perhaps in response to the progress and challenges of the Reconquest and the race's approach to it. Most notably, a large faction including the Apache, Masai, Aztecs, Comanche, Amazons, Zulus and Inuit are in conflict with a smaller collective including the Mongols, Cherokee, Icini and Tlaxcallan. Their opposition goes beyond the traditional 'Honour Feuds' commonly documented, and seems to illustrate a profound difference of opinion between the blocks. All-out Shaltari vs Shaltari warfare is rare but now seems increasingly inevitable as these groups weave actions and counter-strokes around each other in an escalating dance of diplomacy and skirmish that can only result in open warfare.

HOMEWORLDS

The Shaltari are fiercely protective of their mysterious homeworlds. Should another race stumble across one, they are normally shown no mercy and annihilated in short order, thus preventing any return visits. As such, almost nothing is known about the Shaltari homeworlds save that they are well distributed throughout the Galaxy.

COMMUNICATIONS & DIPLOMACY

Mankind has had diplomatic relations with the Shaltari since 2342, in the early days of human galactic exploration. Indeed, it was the Shaltari who chose to make first contact, and to guide mankind to the Cradle Worlds. The fact that this was apparently done only to secure humanity as an ally against another Shaltari Tribe has characterised most subsequent dealings with them. The Shaltari (and indeed humans) are pleased to make alliances in the face of mutual self interest, but will normally balk at shedding blood to the advantage of the other. As such, the history of human-Shaltari interaction has been a morass of conflicting alliances, power struggles and double-dealings.

The Shaltari language is multi-faceted and utterly impossible for humans to replicate. A vast vocal range, coupled with visual signals from colour changes combine to make it quite incomprehensible. As very few Shaltari 'words' (if such a crude term is applied) can even be spoken by humans, any communication between the races is conducted in human languages, in which the Shaltari are fluent.

In this manner, the Shaltari have shared information with humans only sparingly, and at their own pace. This makes intelligence gathering extremely difficult, a fact which contributes to human ignorance. With little understanding of the true nature of their technology and a poor grasp of the language, most Shaltari individuals, constructs and devices are given crude human designations. This is done either by the UCM or by the Shaltari themselves, when seeking to facilitate easy communication.

A good example of this practice is the naming of starships. Most names are given in human language by the Shaltari when the occasion presents itself, although names of individual personalities are usually reassigned as ones from ancient Egyptian antiquity by the UCM or Shaltari. This custom originated after an Elder introduced himself as 'Ramses' to human diplomats, since his real name would be impossible for a human to articulate. This naming convention is useful and practical, as such names are no longer in common usage and thus easily distinguishable as Shaltari ones.

Outright conflict between the Shaltari and humans occurs frequently. Certain tribes for instance have an undisguised contempt for mankind and will take to the battlefield with the slightest provocation. Other tribes have been known to attack seemingly at random, guided by various shadowy motives.

Relations with the PHR have so far followed similar lines as with the UCM. In an early development, the PHR allied itself with Tribes typically in conflict with the UCM, although these alliances have already broken down for the most part and frequently ended in violence. It seems probable that one side duped or misled the other – an unsurprising fact given the famous duplicity of both factions. More importantly, the true motives behind such dealings are unknown although the fact that most were initiated by the PHR is disquieting in the extreme.

ARCHITECTS OF FATE

In stunning twist on October 21st, 2671, the Scourge opened a communication channel with the UCM for the first (and so far only) time. In this admittedly contempt-filled conversation, the Scourge speaker revealed that the Shaltari apparently engineered the entire war by first seeding the Cradle Worlds with humans. Mankind was reckoned to be a prolifically expanding species, both a threat and potential foil to the Scourge. In subtly redirecting Scourge seed ships, the Shaltari may have deliberately unleashed the aliens against mankind in the hope that both species would wipe each other out, thus ridding the Galaxy of two of the Shaltari's most numerous rivals.

While this gambit failed initially since mankind was weakened by the conflict caused by the unexpected Warning of the White Sphere, the Shaltari have allegedly been discreetly aiding mankind to gain strength enough to once more take on the Scourge. If this is true, then the goal must surely be slow death by war of both species. This would explain much of the Shaltari's actions in the conflict so far, since they frequently prevent either side from winning outright victories, perpetuating conflict and death for as long as possible.

However, it must not be forgotten that this information was received from the Scourge, the greatest blight ever to afflict humanity and undoubtedly its absolute enemy. In many ways, this potential truth changes nothing about the nature of conflict as it stands, since mankind's full hatred is and will be directed against the Scourge until every last one is slain. After that hopeful day, the UCM may turn that righteous fury against the Shaltari, should such a heinous allegation prove true.

ARMIES OF THE TRIBES

Shaltari ground forces are characterised by the use of an outlandish and esoteric assortment of war machines, from the towering three-legged Warstriders to fast grav-tanks to the personal Warsuits worn by their infantry. All these constructs are highly distinctive in appearance, encrusted with unknowably complex technological adornments. They are also equipped with the most advanced weaponry known to man, lethal killing tools often sharing similarities with the massive versions on Shaltari warships.

The Shaltari have been almost impossible to bring to full scale pitched battle thus far in the Reconquest. Most of their engagements have been isolated and fast paced, with surgical strike, sudden attack and lightning withdrawal being their preferred method of engagement. Utilising their unique teleportation systems, ground forces can be re-routed and plucked from the battlefield with blinding speed, making it very difficult for an opponent to deliver a strategic-level blow to the capricious aliens.

THE TRIBAL FLEETS

Unlike the UCM, PHR and Scourge, the Shaltari are far from being a united race, at least to the outside observer. Its tribal and martial culture results in internecine conflict on a routine basis and void combat is no exception to this rule. Shaltari vs Shaltari naval duels are apparently a terrible and breathtaking sight to behold, according to those few lucky enough to have observed and returned alive. It seems clear that the rigorous, demanding and bloody codes of honour and conflict are just as all-consuming for Shaltari naval crews as they are to its fiercest warriors. Such routine combat breeds strength and ensures that every surviving Shaltari ship is a veteran of countless honour battles, sometimes stretching back many centuries.

Each significant tribe operates its own fleet of starships – indeed, for a tribe to count as such it must command a certain number of vessels. Some control far more than others of course, with the largest tribe's known naval strength being a system-level threat, and that's not including any vessels retained on the tribe's unknowable homeworld/s. In general though, Shaltari naval strength has been a minor numerical factor in the battles of the Reconquest so far, with the capricious aliens yet to give battle on a fully committed level. Most hope that they simply cannot afford to, such is their slow pace of breeding, low population and desire to preserve their lives into the millennia.

Naval strength in proportion to ground strength between tribes also varies massively, with some being far more potent in the void than on surface. For example, very few ground units of the Maya tribe have been sighted although their frequency of void actions is behind only those of the mighty Apache, Aztecs and Mongols. Other tribes such as the Avars have been a major factor in the ground war, but seem to frequently require transit to the battlefields through the motherships of allied tribes, such is the paltry scale of their fleet.

Each tribe's naval tactics, ship lists and preferences are also wildly different. Particular classes of ship are far more prevalent in the fleets of certain tribes while others distain them almost entirely. A strong example is use of the Amethyst class frigate – a hyper aggressive vessel championed by the famously violent Mongols but largely shunned by the deviously scheming Aztecs, except in special circumstances. In another crucial and enlightening observation, the most ancient vessels are only in service with particular tribes, indicating that groups like the Icini and Inuit are far older than upstarts like the Cherokee and Lombards.

To most naval analysts, it's clear that far from destabilising their race, the Shaltari's implementation of the tribal system has been a force for dynamism, development and striving for betterment. Many believe that this alone has kept this highly advanced and functionally immortal race from stagnating into languid repose, content with its superiority in the universe. However, certain patterns and power blocks are beginning to emerge as the Reconquest unfolds, indicating a deeper level of disagreement and conflict between the tribes beyond the usual level of honour combats. More time and careful observation is needed to determine what bearing this will have on the progress of the war.

SHALTARI STRATEGIES

Teleportation Technology: All Shaltari ground forces deploy by the unique means of teleportation, a fact which has massive bearing on their tactics in a surface attack. This system ensures that there is no risk to ground troops en-route to the surface since they materialise directly on battlefield via a complex hierarchical system of interconnecting elements ending in a dropship-sized teleport gate on the surface. As a result, the troops are only physically present either on the surface or in orbit aboard larger ships distant from the dropsite itself, helping to preserve Shaltari lives from the inglorious losses in transit that other races must contend with. Once on the surface, these troops can be transferred instantly between elements in this system, making the most of their inferior numbers and ensuring that the Shaltari are almost impossible to predict.

Long Range Firepower: Shaltari ships have the best scanners and targeting devices known to the UCM. This gives them the ability to accurately engage enemy ships beyond the reach of any opponent other than rival Shaltari. This advantage shapes Shaltari tactics in battle as their armour is generally weaker than their enemies, making the need to keep them beyond effective range while being within the Shaltari's own paramount to victory. If the enemy does get close enough, Shaltari captains usually have the option of raising shields to massively improve their survivability but at the expense of making them easy targets for enemy scanners to acquire, nullifying the advantage of superior scanners. This dynamic is a strong driving force behind Shaltari battle plans and its understanding is vital for any Starchief to master.

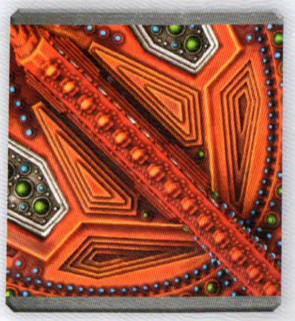
On the Extremes: Many aspects of Shaltari technology and thus tactics are extreme in comparison to those of other races. Often, their ships and weaponry excel at certain things while performing poorly in other aspects. This is generally the result of focused, deliberate design honed towards specific mission parameters and is always a factor in battle planning and tactics. Selecting the right tool for the job and applying it with skill is one of the primary hallmarks of the Shaltari's greatest and longest lived Starchiefs.

Hit and Run: All Shaltari forces excel at high speed, hit and run strikes. Indeed, this style of engagement is one of the hallmarks of Shaltari interventions in the conflict, where whole supply convoys, taskforces and ground formations have been wiped off the map by blindingly fast and focused aggression. The Shaltari are seldom held to protracted engagements and generally use their speed to escape reprisals, covering their retreats with long range precision fire. These tactics are a constant frustration to the Admiralty in multiple theatres since they are so damaging and offer little opportunity for revenge or answering attacks.

Manipulation and Subterfuge: The Shaltari's current strategy appears to be the cunning manipulation of events through multiple subtle means. This ensures that the alien's impact on the Reconquest is out of all proportion to their numbers and certainly their relatively light casualties. These operations require skill and dexterity, both on and off the battlefield, all of which the highly advanced Shaltari excel at. Their aims having been brought to some light in recent weeks, it appears that the goal of these interventions is to perpetuate the conflict, ensuring that neither the UCM nor the Scourge are able to win decisive victory and annihilate the other. The desired endgame appears to be slow death by war of both races, with the equally mounting casualties on both sides being a boon to the Shaltari's machinations for the Galaxy as a whole. However, there does appear to be some internal conflict emerging over the issue, as a small number of multi-tribe power blocks are becoming more aggressively opposed to each other as the Reconquest grinds on.

Ancient Perfection: Various Shaltari ships are undoubtedly the oldest yet encountered by the UCM. Although estimates vary, it's generally established that some of the most venerable are over 8000 years old, a truly incredible figure. This speaks of their technological advancement over younger races in an unequivocal way and highlights their mastery of survival in battle when a skilled captain is at the helm. This huge span of time also makes Shaltari technological advancement glacially slow compared to the rapid progress made by other races, since the aliens have reached a level so lofty that further progress is challenging in the extreme. Often, apparently 'new' technological wonders sighted by the UCM are simply first observations on rare systems that are only recently being deployed. However, developments and applications for existing technology such as new ship classes are emerging and it does seem that the Shaltari are far from stagnant when it comes to designing new types to reflect the shifting landscape of the conflict.

SHIPS



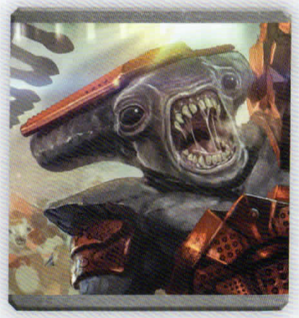
Armour: The Shaltari consider ordinary physical armour to be a crude and primitive form of protection. Nevertheless, all ships require certain solidity in outer hull simply to protect against the stresses of manoeuvre, acceleration and gravity fluctuations when in combat. In addition, a modest level of armoured protection ensures that Shaltari vessels are protected against light enemy fire and debris collisions with their shields down, ensuring a very small signature and making it difficult for a foe to acquire target lock at all. The armour that Shaltari ships do possess is of course highly advanced and largely non-metallic, although poorly understood by UCM materials scientists. While far stronger than primitive equivalents it is also incredibly thin, highlighting a preference for available internal space over a protection which a skilful captain should not put to the test in any case.

Signature Disruption Systems: A key part of the protection of Shaltari vessels is a suite of systems designed to make it difficult for an enemy to acquire target lock, ensuring that return fire is inaccurate or impossible. Such a countermeasure is far more advanced than simple armour and grants large Shaltari ships such as cruisers the battlefield visibility of a frigate in real terms. While the employment of certain energetic technologies such as superweapons or shields cannot be hidden by these systems, their use is always deliberate and thus at a captain's discretion.

Energy Shields: The second key part of a Shaltari vessel's protection is its energy shields. These are passive, all encompassing systems that envelope the entire ship in a protective blanket of eldritch energies, shielding it from almost any potential attack. However, their use brings two distinct disadvantages that must be weighed carefully before they are used. Firstly, the shield interferes with a ships' own point defence systems since the shield is passive and indiscriminate, making them useless when the shields are up. Secondly, shields are highly energetic systems, making it far easier for an enemy to acquire target lock when they are raised. As a result, they are best employed only when an enemy is within effective firing range in any case, close enough to overcome the Shaltari's signature disruption systems.

Personal Grav-Atmo Fields: Interestingly, there are no artificial gravity systems in operation aboard Shaltari vessels. The aliens consider such machines to be crude and overbearing and instead choose their own gravity on an individual basis. Each crew member wears a device which allows them to manipulate their own weight within the ship, giving them the freedom to soar to distant areas or walk as if on land. A second device projects a small personal 'atmosphere' of breathable air at tolerable pressures around the user, allowing the design of whole deck areas open to the void as well as external spacewalks without suits. These devices rely on the powerful generators of the ship itself for power and can thus only be operated in the immediate vicinity of the vessel. Such an arrangement is recorded to be deeply disturbing and disorienting for a human visitor aboard a Shaltari vessel on the few occasions access has been permitted during diplomatic relations.

Crew: Most Shaltari vessels have a tiny crew, even by PHR standards. Most of their ancient systems are so reliable and automated that crew are seldom needed in attendance. Almost everything on a Shaltari ship is highly advanced and efficient, requiring a small number of organic operators largely for decision making purposes as the Shaltari frown on fully sentient AI's. The only ships with a significant population are motherships and carriers, since ground armies are where most fighting Shaltari reside and strike craft require living pilots.

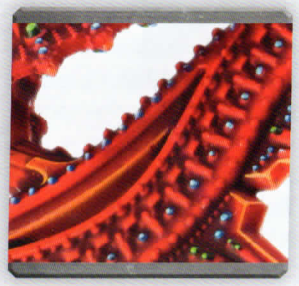


Auxiliary Crew: The Shaltari generally consider tasks such as maintenance and operation of unwarlike systems to be beneath them. However, even Shaltari ships require an engineering and support crew to function. In these cases, the aliens typically employ beings from subservient races in service to the Shaltari, such as the famously keen and numerous Pungari. This race in particular is highly useful aboard ship and individuals are all too eager to risk their lives in the menial and dangerous work shunned by their aloof masters in return for appreciation and support.

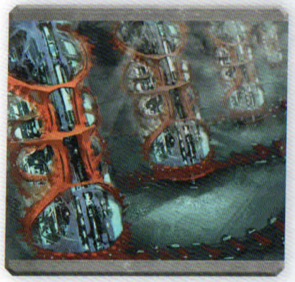
The Captain: Ultimately, each vessel has a captain whose authority is absolute and who is at the heart of the crew. The position is one of high honour and attainable only after several natural lifetimes of exemplary service to the tribal fleet. Once a ship's captain is in place, that individual will usually be expected to serve on each vessel they command for a minimum of two centuries before they may graduate to a larger ship, should they be deemed high enough quality for the privilege. Once command of a mighty battleship or supercarrier is attained, that individual will usually stay in command until death, since climbing the ranks to such a lofty height requires an obsessive devotion to the arts of naval warfare that's almost impossible for a Shaltari to escape.

The Core: The command crew of a Shaltari vessel are concentrated in a secluded and central part of the ship known as the core. It is surrounded by uncharacteristically thick armour, internal energy shielding and backup generators, ensuring this vital area of the ship remains functional even after crippling damage. Each ship only has one of these and each typically houses between three and nine Shaltari who work together to direct the ship and make decisions. Visually, the core is an incomprehensible (to a human) array of holographic displays, indicator projections and free-floating command systems as dazzling to behold as they are technologically advanced.

Scanners and Comms: Shaltari vessels have the most advanced and potent scanners and communication equipment known to man. These grant them extended firing range and capability beyond any other race. They are an essential pillar in the alien's naval strategies, as it is a crucial advantage key to crushing the enemy before they can return fire.



Power Cores: Shaltari vessels feature literally hundreds, even thousands, of small power cores. These miniaturised generators are spread throughout the ship, although they are concentrated around the systems that need them most, increasing efficiency and redundancy. Their proliferation throughout the ship makes a Shaltari vessel much like a cluster of living cells, where superficial wounds cannot destroy the life of the whole.



Inertial Dampers: Although individual Shaltari carry personal gravity control devices, it is true that the ship as a whole still requires a system to counteract the g-forces caused by manoeuvre in combat. This is to prevent anything not tied down from becoming a lethal missile and to keep its living crew conscious. These systems are similar in effect to UCM ones although they are regarded by the Shaltari in a casual manner appropriate to basic amenities rather than as the technological marvel they are to human spacefarers.

External Gravity Manipulation: Shaltari vessels steer exclusively through the manipulation of gravity while in orbit. While this is a similar principle to how PHR and Scourge vessels steer, Shaltari ships do so without needing any external moving parts – the ships simply appear to change direction with poise and grace and with no visual indicators of the titanic forces involved in redirecting millions of tons of starship.

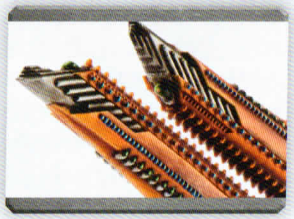
Foldspace Drives: It is well known that the Shaltari have been able to initiate pinpoint accurate foldspace jumps to anywhere in the Galaxy without the need for nodes at the destination for thousands of years. This makes them the most capable starfarers known to humanity as well as a constant threat in any theatre, as their arrival and actions are nightmarish to predict. Their drives also have blisteringly fast recharge times, making it impossible to pin them in place once they have arrived in system. If a Shaltari fleet jumps to an occupied area by mistake they seldom need to pay the price for incomplete intelligence, and can jump away as quickly as they arrived before any response can be brought to bear. The only restriction that remains to them is that they cannot jump any closer to a planet's gravity well than other races, indicating that this is a solid barrier in physics that's impossible to breach. As such, they can only be brought to battle effectively once they have committed to approaching a planet, where they must race to the outer marker on sublight if they wish to flee, giving an opponent a fleeting chance to catch them.

Sublight Engines: Shaltari ships feature sublight engines to provide motive power when not travelling by foldspace. However, unlike those of other races these drives are sub-surface, invisible from the outside and give off no visible to electromagnetic signature – all factors which help to keep Shaltari vessels from being targeted accurately. How these drives function is still a mystery to the UCM as their intricate workings become unstable and locally meltdown whenever a ship sustains catastrophic damage, making study of wreckage fruitless as with most other complex Shaltari technologies.

Escape Teleporters: The Shaltari value their own lives above all else and as a result their vessels contain the most effective and robust systems for crew extraction in the event that a ship must be abandoned. Each crew member wears a network of small adornments that readies them for immediate teleport whenever they are at battle stations. If necessary, they can be transferred from one of a score of internal teleport gates to any other gate either on the surface or on another ship, provided that they are in range. This range is finite though, making it possible for individuals on isolated ships or entirely wiped out fleets to meet their final deaths.

SHIP-BORNE WEAPONS

Disintegrators: These are the standard ship-ship weapons in service with the tribal fleets. They are flexible and commonly used energy weapons generally mounted in fixed banks, although they allow some flexibility in fire arc. These weapons transfer huge amounts of energy to a highly localised area of the target in cracking, split second bursts. Unusually for energy weapons, they do not disperse in area of effect at all over distance, always hitting a tiny area with massive power. This causes various atomic effects to take place as in the cores of main sequence stars, frequently releasing further energies into the target. The effect is a localised explosive detonation, shattering materials to tiny fragments or molecules into their constituent atoms and leaving holes in the target with very little discernable debris, resulting in this fearsome weapon's moniker.

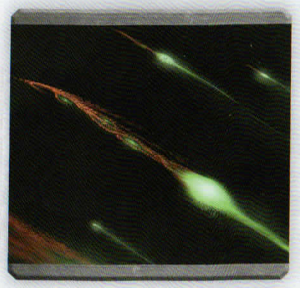


Disruptors: These weapons are similar in operation to the more commonly employed disintegrators, although they are more limited in scope. Their beams are far narrower in available arc and are somewhat less powerful. However, they have a much lower energy requirement, freeing up generator space aboard ship for alternative uses, be it for other thirsty systems or simple internal space. This makes these weapons useful on support ships, specialist vessels and carriers.

Particle Lances: These are formidably powerful beam weapons which focus subatomic particles at incredible velocities down a narrow projected channel for several seconds of burn. This has the effect of cutting through virtually any known armour with contemptuous ease and almost always causing damage to the target. Reports from the frontline repeatedly describe neat holes being bored all the way through a battleship and out the other side. This makes them highly reliable killers, frequently employed when a particular target must be destroyed without undue reliance on the odds. However, although the damage is absolute throughout the beam's path, its energies do not spread far laterally through the target, limiting the total destructive potential of these weapons to below that of disintegrators.

Ion Storm Generators: These are highly unorthodox weapons as they are designed for both the close action ship-ship role and for orbital bombardment. They usually assume the form of highly distinctive banks of orb-like structures, making them easily identifiable. They inflict damage through coruscating waves of ionic power, battering a target with forceful energy. As close action weapons they are brutally effective, and being energy weapons they circumvent all known point defences. In the orbital bombardment role, the energies they unleash can cause highly localised and precise bouts of energetic discharge akin to a lightning storm, but thousands of times more destructive. Reports of whole city blocks being flayed to constituent rubble and infantry being stripped of flesh in grotesque ways too hideous to put into words are legion.

Gravity Coils: These unique technological marvels harness the force of gravity in an offensive capacity. In use, they focus a wave of varied gravitational disturbance to the target, causing bulkheads to rupture under their suddenly multiplied weight or to tear apart in sudden attraction to adjacently affected areas. These shuddering and mutable effects can also be used to forcibly alter the course of an enemy ship, causing great disruption to formations and frequently diverting targets towards the guns of other Shaltari or away from precious assets.



Harpoons: Harpoons are standard Shaltari close action weapons and are physical munitions akin to the missiles commonly employed by other races. Indeed, they are one of the very few weapons used by the aliens that employ a physical projectile. They are self-propelled, thin dart-like munitions designed to punch deep within the hull before detonating. They are generally more reliable and consistent than missiles although ships are usually only equipped with a modest number of them, as the Shaltari generally shun close action engagements unless ships are specifically designed for the task.

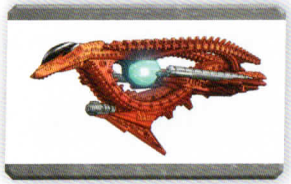
Microwave Arrays: These terrifying weapons are uncharacteristic for the Shlatari as they are generally a primary weapon system and are designed for close action attacks. They inflict terrible damage to the victim through the projection of wide beams of microwaves, heating the target to extremes enough to melt metals and vaporise composites. There are even reports of crews being cooked through the armour of their ship, their fluids boiling from orifices in a visceral nightmare which brings the horror of ground battlefields to crews usually isolated from such terrors.

Point Defence Beamers: The hulls of all Shaltari warships are lined with tiny laser projectors which together form the vessel's point defence matrix. These systems are highly effective, offering Shaltari ships superlative levels of protection against close action and strike craft attacks, superior to almost any equivalent from another race. The only downside to these systems is that they are affected by a ship's own energy shields when they are raised, necessitating the deactivation of these small weapons in these circumstances.

Antimatter Warheads: Most Shaltari capital ships carry a small compliment of antimatter missiles, more advanced versions of the nuclear weapons carried by lesser races. While they are cleaner and leave less radiation effects in their wake, they are just as ruinous to the target, capable of turning a whole city district to glass in an instant. However, in one of the many quirks of their complex honour systems, the Shaltari view the use of these weapons as highly distasteful, reflecting a failure to fight a war conventionally on the part of their user. They are also horribly challenging to produce, even for the Shaltari, necessitating limited manufacture in favour of more efficient military technologies. As such, they are only employed sparingly and in times of dire need.

STRIKE CRAFT

Fighters: The tribal fleets typically employ the lighting fast Starblade fighter as their standard interceptor and close protection strike craft. A far larger and void capable version of the ground forces' Warspear, this craft is an essential pillar in the Shaltari's guard as they are the only means of granting a ship point defence while its shields are up. Fortunately for the aliens, these are some of the fastest and most lethal attack craft in the Galaxy, each flown by one of the most warlike and aggressive Shaltari in the tribes.

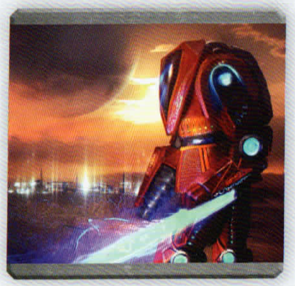


Bombers: The Shaltari also employ anti-ship strike craft, most commonly the Starglaive bomber. This fearsome hunter of ships has a crew of two and is armed with several miniaturised versions of a capital ship's weapons systems, configured to hit weak spots with pinpoint precision. Bombers grant Shaltari carriers excellent long range strike capability as well as an offensive option when its awesome fighter craft are not required.

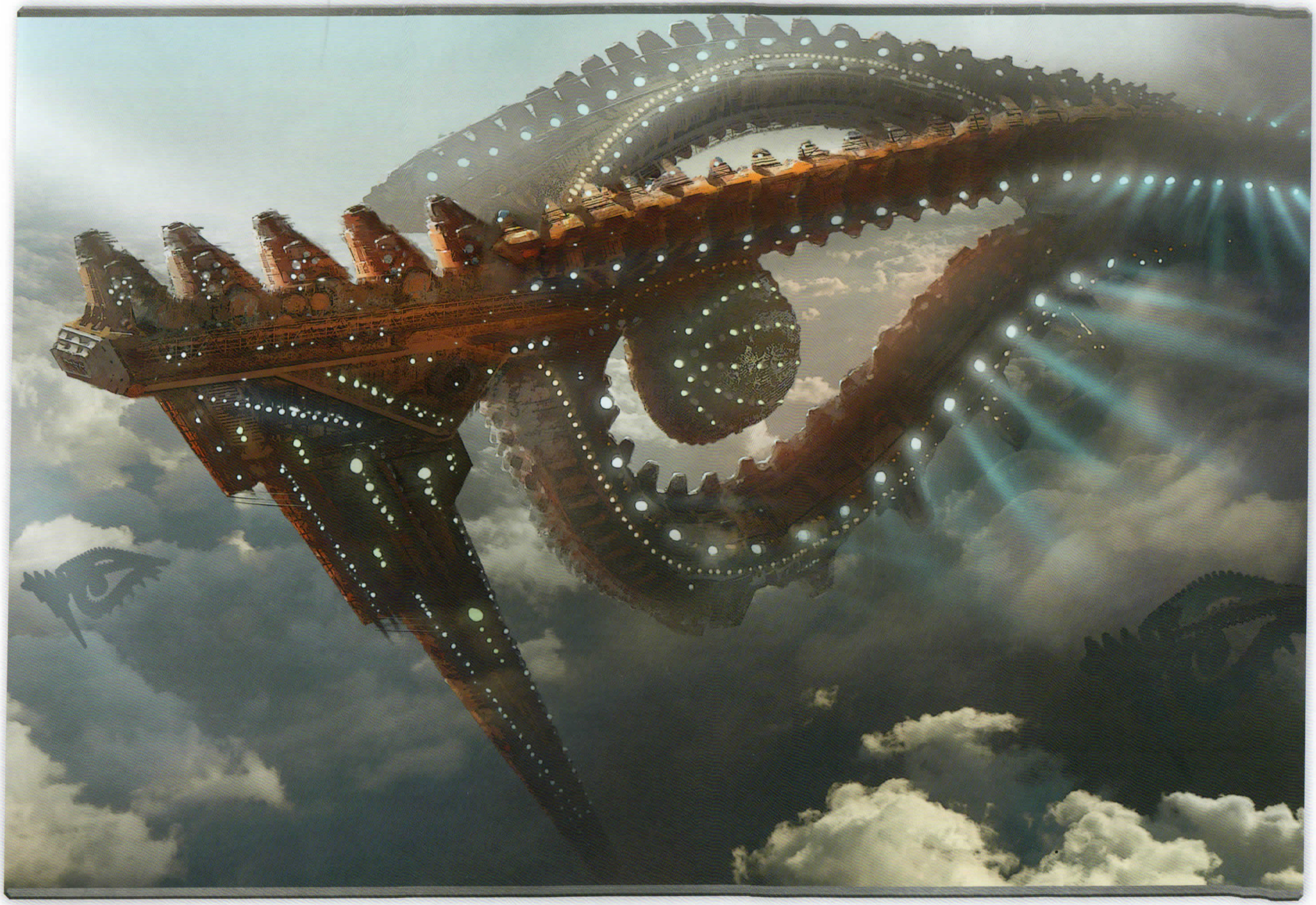
Gates: These are atmospheric aircraft that are the final link in the teleportation chain which materialise the Shaltari's formidable ground forces directly onto the battlefield. The most common types are the Gaia, Eden and Spirit although other more offensively oriented constructs such as the Firedrake also feature gate capacity. They are agile and small, making them suitable for assaults against hardened targets since they can dodge cumbersome defence battery fire with ease. They typically materialise from their host mothership via a voidgate, a small ship which has descended from orbit to take up station over the battlespace. As the final link in the teleportation chain, gates are the only means of planetfall for the Shaltari's awesome Warstriders, grav-tanks and ground constructs. Since they are so few in number, the Shaltari have no equivalent to the bulk landers of other races, the crude meat crates that would put too many precious lives at risk in transit. This isn't an issue for the Shaltari as they are not overly concerned with conquest and gates can transfer ground units between each other, ensuring that strength is applied surgically and is seldom wasted.

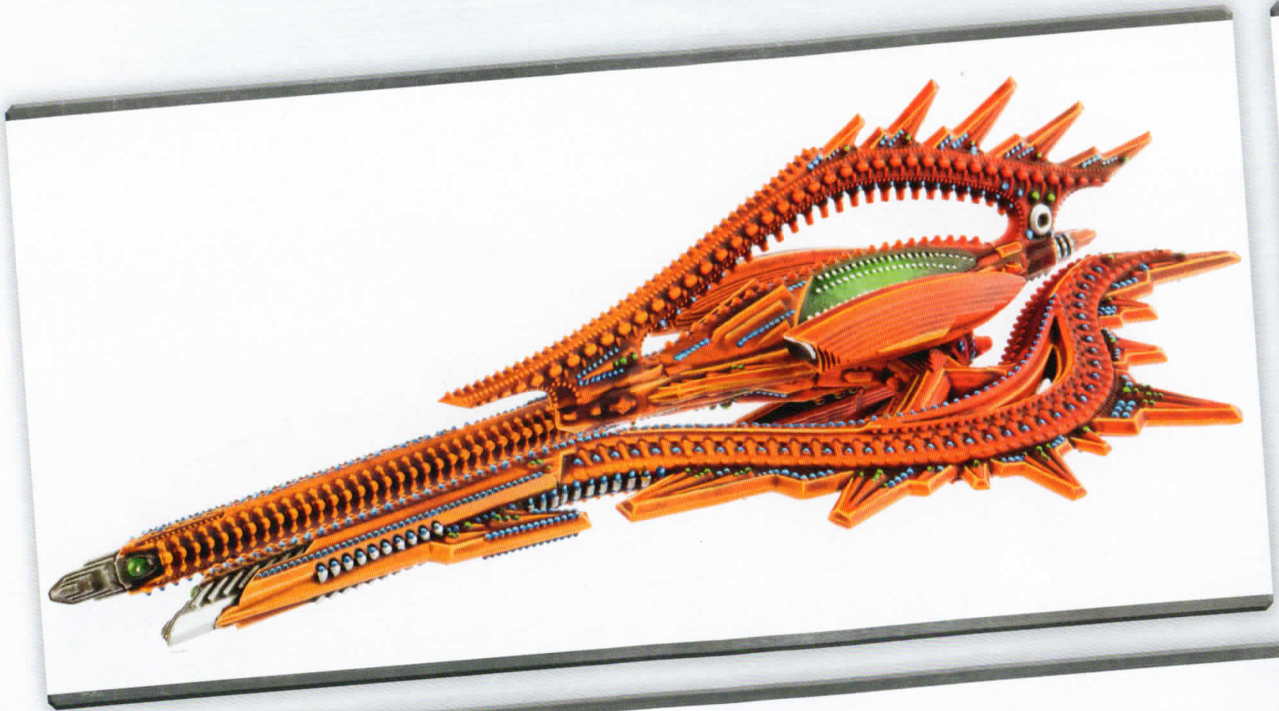
GROUND ASSETS

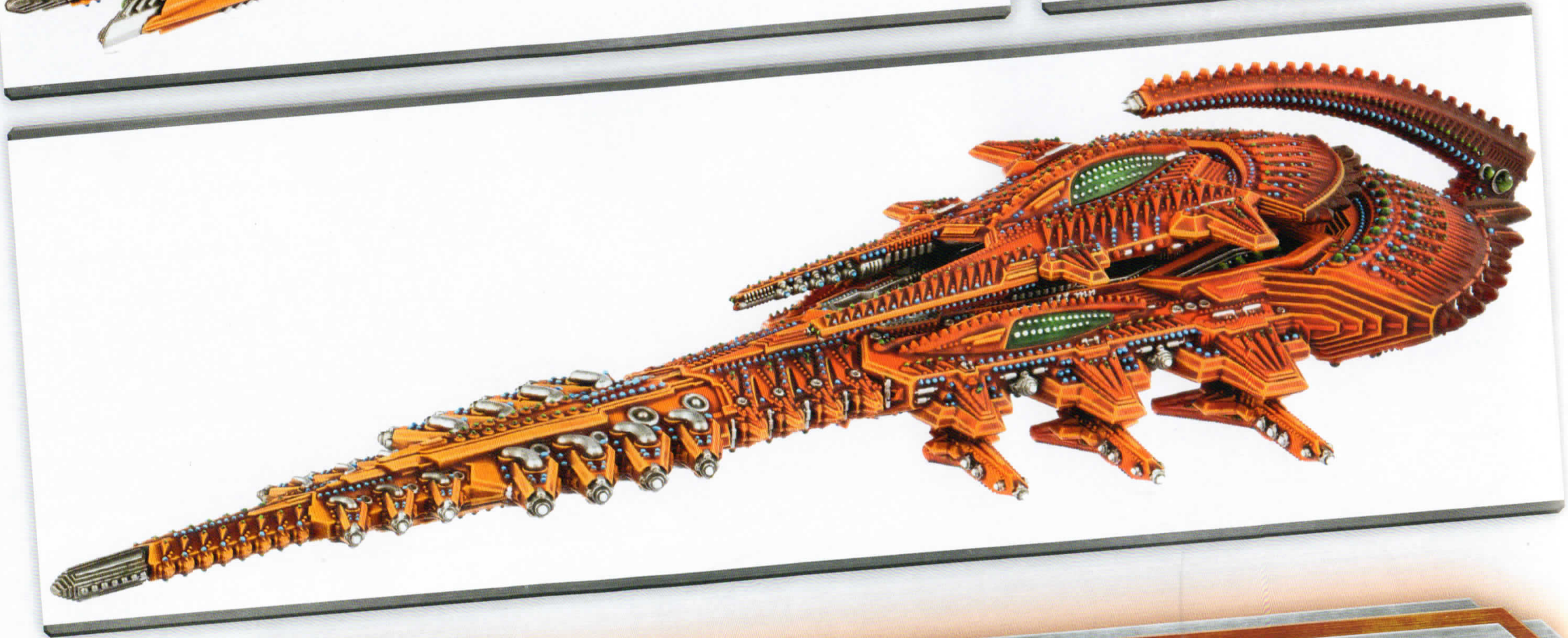
Armoured Formations: Shaltari armoured units are rightly feared by all who must face them and are just as terrifyingly advanced as their space-borne cousins. Towering three legged Warstriders such as the Jaguar, Ocelot and Leopard are the most iconic symbols of Shaltari might, while nibble and swift grav tanks such as the Tomahawk, Kukri and Caiman ensure that any enemy can easily be chased down and slain. Few foes can stand against their potent majesty.



Infantry Formations: Shaltari foot soldiers are always formidable warriors the equal of several Colonial Legionnaires in combat. At the very least, a Shaltari Brave goes to battle in an armoured Warsuit, a towering construct rendering the diminutive wearer into a 7-foot high killing machine. While they are few, small formations of these warriors offer the killing power of divisions many times their size. When the Shaltari do need sheer manpower, they call on subservient races such as the Pungari, who are willing to die in far greater numbers than the Shaltari have the stomach for.





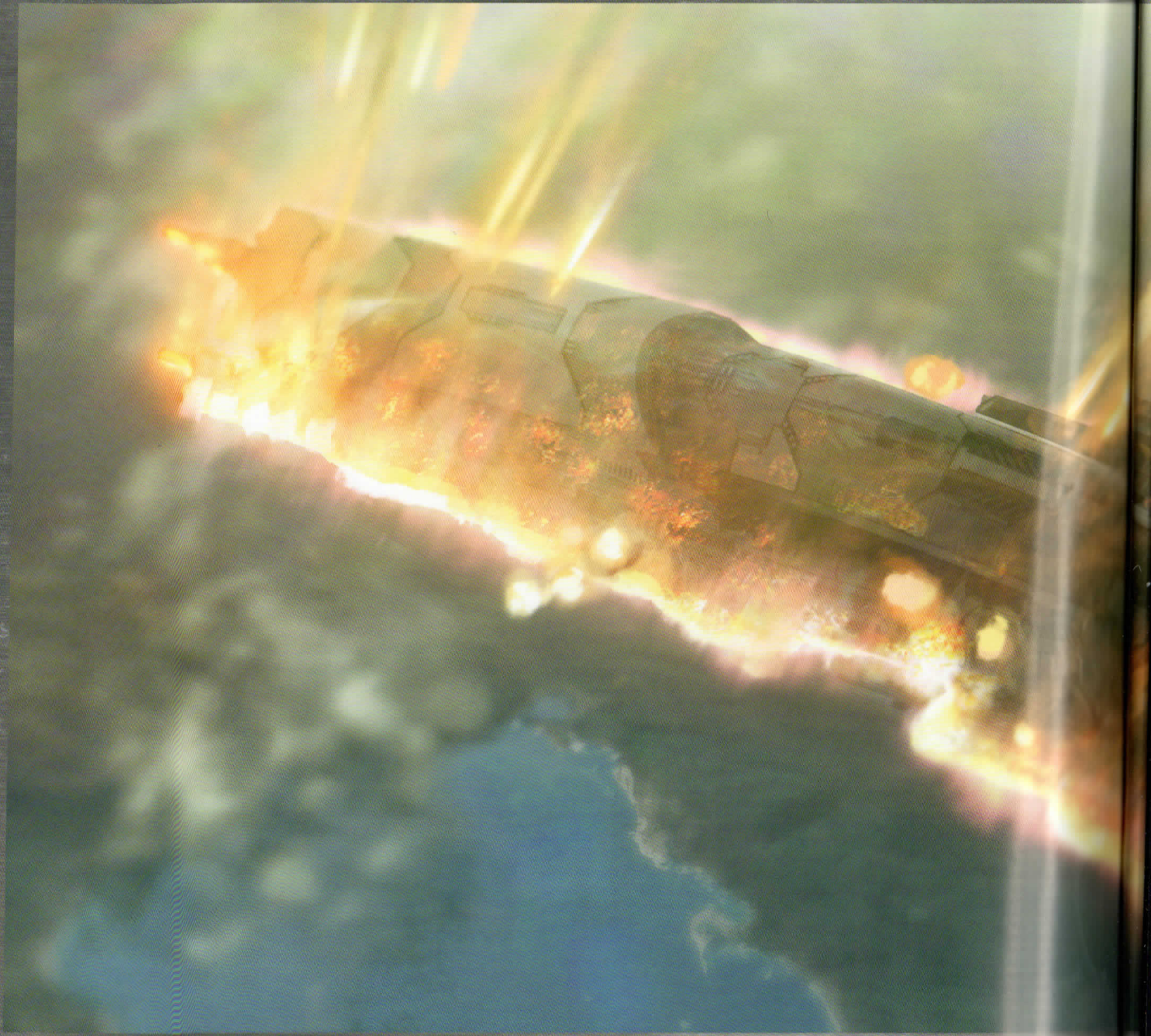


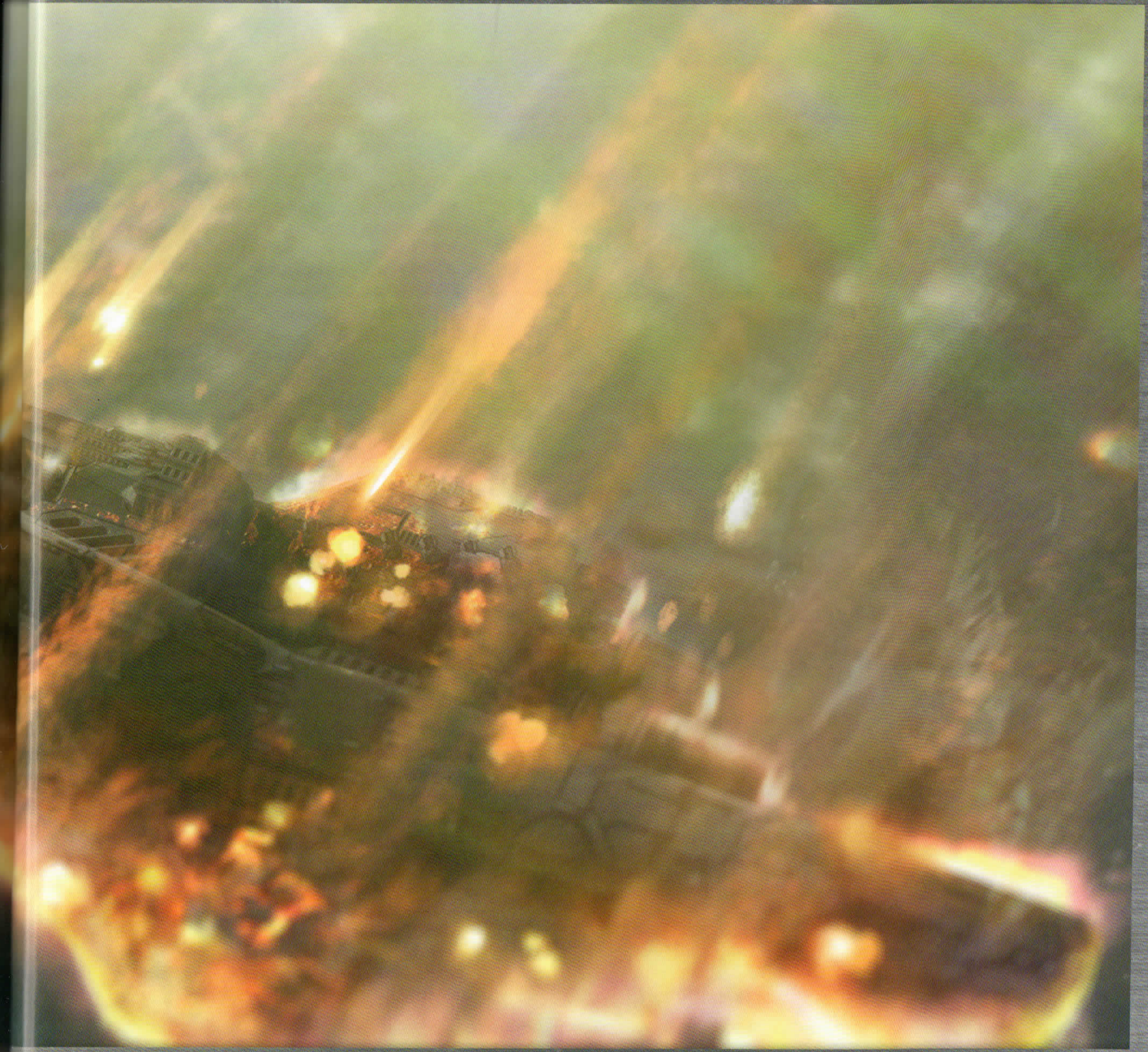
"HULL BREACH. HULL BREACH. REPAIR CREWS 9 THROUGH 12 REPORT TO DECK FOUR," intoned an automated warning announcement, the third in as many minutes, each one different. As she ran towards the transfer elevator, Specialist Sera Gilles knew it was far more serious than a simple hull breach. Normally, CIC would be sending the teams in person, real human voices on the end of her personal communicator. All she was getting as she tried to raise the XO was static. She reckoned the bridge was gone, along will the entire command staff.

That last hit had been catastrophic, she just knew it. She had to go on feel and instinct with no visuals and no comms feed. Her well honed intuition was telling her that this might be the end of the *UCMS Simon J. Park*, the battleship she'd been proud to serve on for over fifteen years. It always struck her as bizarre that a ship might be stricken to an extent that she'd never recover, but in certain sections, it might seem normal while others were hell in the void. She was just glad to still be a living breathing person rather than the collection of carbon atoms that she'd be if the cores had ruptured. There might still be hope after all.

She slammed the transfer button to deck four and waited for the elevator to move. *Hang the speculation*, whatever was going on elsewhere, she'd bloody well do her job and go where she was needed. Still no movement. Frustrated, she slapped the button again and again with no result. An ominous, keening creak passed through the superstructure around her, the wail of a ship in mortal agony.

"HULL BREACH. HULL BREACH. REPAIR CREWS 13 THROUGH 17 REPORT TO... This is Lieutenant Commander Wilkins. The captain is dead, the ship is lost. Abandon ship. I repeat, abandon ship. May the luck of the Colonies be with you." After this abrupt interruption, that message began playing on endless loop. Seconds later, Sera was running for the deck seven arterial passageway, desperate to reach a lifeboat. Clearly too late for duty now. She felt





so... *detached*... though, from whatever was happening elsewhere, it seemed so... calm here. How could the ship be lost? As the fluorescents flickered off and green backup floor lighting kicked in, she changed her mind. This really was the death of the ship.

Keep running. Keep running. Don't stop. Keep going. She chanted in her head as she ran, divesting herself of her heavy tool belt as she pelted for the portside outer hull quadrant of deck seven and the nearest lifeboat cluster. As she rounded the bend, she saw two portals already slammed shut, their boats having blasted to safety. *One left, on the end there, must make it. Make it or die.*

As she reached the escape pod, she cannoned into the last desperate soul to cross the threshold before her. Gazing back into the corridor, she saw two more shipmates pelting full tilt towards the pod, red from the exertion... *No... Red from burns...* Their hair was blackened, their uniforms singed. The first collapsed to her knees in agony, finally succumbing to the inevitable. As Sera saw a red glow develop at the end of the corridor, quickly building to orange fury, she instinctually slammed the door release, leaving the last runner to his fate. A millisecond after the escapee next to her levelled and incredulous glare in her direction, a rolling ball of searing flame swept through the corridor visible through the tiny viewing window, incinerating the distant runner to ash.

Half a second later, the escape pod's release anchors unlocked and its engines fired, slamming Sera to the deck as she'd had no chance to harness herself in. As soon as the pod cleared the ship, she pulled herself up and stumbled, leaden footed now, to the viewing port. What she saw filled her heart with horror, hatred and above all, sadness. The hull of the once mighty Beijing class battleship *Simon J. Park* was cloven in two, slowly separating into two majestic halves as a firestorm of death filled the gulf between them, sounding her death to the heavens.